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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

EARLE BIRNEY'S MOUNTAIN POEMS

by

NANCY SCHELSTRAETE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Earle Birney's Mountain Poems submitted by Nancy Schelstraete, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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ABSTRACT

This study defines and examines a selected group of Earle Birney's poems which I call "mountain poems", using them as a probe to reveal many of Birney's thematic concerns and poetic techniques.

Chapter I is an account of my coming to terms with Birney's diversity of style and subject matter, first by narrowing myself to poems of direct experience and, secondly, by discovering in the mountain poems an organic pattern within Birney's work. The second chapter discusses various problems in Canadian criticism of Birney's poetry, and suggests that a focus on the mountain poems provides a unified yet flexible approach which overcomes many of these problems. My critical approach is described in Chapter III; taking the images and narrative details of "David" as the touchstone for choosing related poems, I have examined the mountain poems as a group. Thus the mountain with its attendant and defining images grows in richness and complexity until it attains the full force of a symbol.

The next three chapters contain a detailed analysis of some twenty poems, and passing reference to several others, with a view to illustrating the interrelationship of form and theme in the mountain poems. Chapter IV establishes the details of the mountain ethos as it emerges in several early poems about the mountain climbing experience, which can eventually be seen as emblematic of human experience in general. Chapter V shows Birney using the mountain ethos in wider contexts, often inverting its details or using them ironically to make indirect yet powerful statements about wilderness and civilization, history, geology, ecology, and sociology. Chapter VI discusses three mountain poems concerned with the relationship between friends which is an important element in the basic mountain poem "David", and the relationship between memory and experience.

After defining a literary symbol, the last chapter concludes that Birney's mountain is a complex and ever-changing symbol which is central to Birney's work as a whole. It is symbolic of various levels of human experience and expressive of many themes--the most basic of which is the wilderness-civilization dichotomy--which appear throughout his work. An examination of the mountain poems also illustrates Birney's craftsmanship in using the concrete details of the mountain ethos and arranging them in rhythmic spells of words to suggest, without stating them directly, many significant and universal meanings.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge the patience and professionalism of Jo Van Horne, who typed this thesis.

DEDICATION

For Leah and Colin

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> In order to express 'the many,' as simply contra-distinguished from 'the one,' I have hazarded the smile of the reader, by introducing to his acquaintance, from the forgotten terminology of the old schoolmen, the phrase, multeity....Thus the Philosopher of the later Platonic, or Alexandrine school, named the triangle the first-born of beauty, it being the first and simplest symbol of multeity in unity.[1]

Coleridge's "forgotten" phrase aptly describes Earle Birney's poetry: in reading Birney's Collected Poems one is overwhelmed by its multeity of subject matter and its diversity of form. The poems range from gentle lyrics to biting satires, from long traditional narratives to single-word experimental concrete poems. They contain turtles and tractors, highway signs and sunsets, ulcers and ecstasy. Such plenty can offer only delight to the general reader; for the critic it is a problem. Where in this multeity is unity to be found? Does Birney have "a first and simplest symbol"?

It is as impossible to unify this wide variety of poems as it is to unify the world itself. In this study I have thus been forced to limit my focus; to examine all or even most of Birney's poems would be to write many hundred pages. I was guided in my choices first by preference for certain poems, and then by discovery of certain organic patterns among the poems. Finally, however, the mountain began to emerge as a possible symbol of many of Birney's central concerns, perhaps as Birney's "first and simplest symbol".

I journeyed to the mountain by a long and circuitous path with many crossroads. I started at poems based on primary experience; that is, poems which deal with Birney's direct and even personal experience of the

world, though it may be filtered through a persona. This eliminated Birney's satires, which have social criticism as their end rather than the rendering of direct experience (though some do present experience as well). It also eliminated the Anglo-Saxon poems, which require an understanding of the complex aesthetics of Anglo-Saxon poetry before the reader can appreciate them, and which also comment on the modern world through formal juxtaposition with the Anglo-Saxon world. Fine poems they may be, but they are at least one remove from direct experience because of their form: they are experience intellectualized in a rather esoteric way.

The concrete poems were another road not taken, for they deal not with the poet's experience of the world but with the reader's experience of the poem as a concrete object. Like the Anglo-Saxon poem, the concrete poem has its specialized aesthetic. It is at the edges of poetry, moving toward painting on the visual front and toward music or pure sound on the auditory front. Since the poet as person is usually removed from the concrete poems, I considered them a side journey on my road to the mountain.

I followed the Birney who is rooted in the concrete world; the Birney who writes poems which are sung at the place where the poet confronts his experience. In trying to find order, however momentary, in the chaos of detail which surrounds him, Birney often chooses to write what appears to be a direct rendering of experience. To capture experience in a "cage of form" is somehow to make it whole, though not necessarily comprehensible.

The mature and the best Birney refuses to intellectualize or to analyze his experiences: this has become one of the most characteristic features of his poetry (apart from his satires and Anglo-Saxon poems).

It is a stance which is represented most stubbornly in his espousal, defence, and practice of concrete poetry, for this genre has almost none of the rational attitude towards the world. Yet even in his more traditional poetry, Birney seldom uses abstract terms, seldom does any philosophizing. He simply presents his experiences (that is, the experiences of his persona) as directly as possible, creating a spell of words which recreate the experience through their rhythm and suggestiveness as much as through their bald meaning.

Archibald MacLeish, in his book Poetry and Experience, asserts that it is the nature of poetic activity to "capture experience in a cage of form". In searching for the universals of poetry, MacLeish refers to the ancient Chinese poet Lu Chi and says:

> To Lu Chi the begetting of a poem involves not a single electric pole thrust deep into the acids of the self but a pair of poles--a man and the world opposite.. A poem begins in the Wen Fu, not in isolation but in relationship. There is the writer here. And over there, there is 'the mystery of the universe'--the 'four seasons'--'the myriad objects'--'the complexity of the world'. If a poem gets itself written, not in a rhapsodic cry but in a relationship of man and world, then poetry is something which has to do with that relationship--something which traffics in some way between world and man. But in what way? Lu Chi tells us. The poet is one who 'traps Heaven and Earth in the cage of form'.[2]

For MacLeish, poetry is not simply a vehicle for the outpouring of the poet's feelings, nor is it necessarily concerned with philosophical and abstract reasoning. Rather, poetry manages to bring together the irreconcilable opposites, emotion and reason. As MacLeish says:

> The poet's labor is not to wait until the cry gathers of itself in his own throat. The poet's labor is to struggle with the meaninglessness and silence of the world until he can force it to mean: until he can make the silence answer and the non-Being BE. It is a labor which undertakes to 'know' the world not by exegesis or demonstration or proofs but directly, as a man knows apple in the mouth.[3]

Birney's poetry, then, is the poetry of direct experience. If he offers the "meaning" of an experience in a poem, it is with hesitation, tentativeness. His "explanations" are characteristically brief and vague, leaving the burden of abstraction with the reader or, more positively, offering him the opportunity to draw his own conclusions. In "David", for example, the poet's summary of the meaning of the whole experience is confined to a single line: "That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains."

By refusing to intellectualize in his poems, Birney is taking a firm stance with regard to the world and to poetry. His manner of placing direct experience paramount, particularly the heightened or single moment, and depicting it as fully as possible without speculating on its meaning, becomes a statement that the experience itself is the whole truth of reality. He is a particularist, not a generalist, and his poems are full of the details of experience described with precise diction. He does not speak of "flowers" but of bougainvillea, morning glory, magnolias, harebells, water hyacinths, gilliflowers, orchids, oleander, hibiscus; he does not speak of "birds" but of gulls, swans, peccaries, chickens, pelicans, egrets, flamingos, wrens, crows and cormorants; and he doesn't speak at all of liberty, justice, love, existence, and so on--at least in those general terms.

Precision of diction is usually a desired feature of poetry, but in Birney the variety and sheer number of precise words makes the world tangible and concrete rather than idealized.[4] The characters in his poems speak in colorful and individual dialects--Australian, Canadian, and British English as well as English with a Spanish, Hawaiian, or Mexican accent. He thus aligns himself with the poets who "see the world in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour"--the poets of everyday life, real

characters, concrete situations and specific details--the Chaucer-Shakespeare tradition rather than the Milton-Shelley tradition.

Poet and critic Herbert Read also writes a book entitled Poetry and Experience; the relationship between poetry and experience is central not only in Birney's poetry but in poetry per se. Read, too, sees poetry as a bridge between the eternal dichotomies which philosophy, and sometimes poetry, have always expressed. Read says the image in poetry and in sculpture or painting has the following function:

> to serve as a bridge between those two realms for which we have many names--not only heaven and earth, but spirit and matter, essence and existence, the many and the one, the id and the ego, chaos and harmony, idea and icon. 'Among other unions of contraries found in beauty there is that of the instantaneous and the eternal,' Simone Weil again. In this dialectical process there is no permanent synthesis except in the work of art.[5]

In the dichotomies which Read lists, Birney is aligned with matter, existence, the many, the id, chaos, icon, and the instantaneous. The other halves--heaven, spirit, essence, and so on--are implied rather than stated directly. As Goethe said, "A poet needs all philosophy, but he must keep it out of his work".[6] Birney himself, in The Creative Writer, expresses the same relationship between poetry, experience, and philosophy:

> I am hoping to make three points about poetry-writing in general. The first of these is that the poem is likely to arise from a sudden feeling in the poet that an apparently trivial incident or object or thing, some chip carried in the flow of experience, is eerily and marvelously representative of a central truth about life itself. The second is that the 'truth' glimpsed may be crashingly obvious....But my third point is that the poem is neither the philosophic cliché, nor the mere description of the thing, the incident; it is the relating of the two, the finding of the big in the little....[7]

Yet another critic addresses himself to the relationship between poetry and experience. Donald Stauffer, in his book about Yeats, The Golden Nightingale, says:

> The knowledge of the poet is presentational, not argumentative; it lives in pictures, not abstractions; it is tied to particulars as inextricably as experience itself; and if it expresses ideas, those ideas will include the mysteries, the uncertainties and the hopes which have made most men know that free will is a fact.[8]

To state that most of Birney's poems are based on direct experience, however, is still to be in very general territory. Yet there are patterns of experience in Birney's work, and two in particular which I was interested in exploring: poems about the mountain experience and poems about the Latin American and Asian experience. The latter present the poet in confrontation with a foreign culture, responding to his experiences clearly and openly. Some of Birney's finest poems fall into this category. I chose to explore the former, however, mainly because "David", Birney's first published poem, is a mountain poem, and it seemed a fitting place to start.

My study is not chronological, though I begin with "David" and move to other manifestations of the mountain experience in later poems. Eventually, using the images and narrative details of "David" as the basis for choosing other mountain poems, a group of some 20 poems clustered around "David". Together, they give a complex vision of the mountain experience, both realistically and, by implication, symbolically. The delineation of the mountain experience is a basic aim in this study.

The mountain is a place for direct and varied experience, and historically it has also been symbolic of various levels of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual achievement. Birney does not tap these historical

connotations directly but develops his own expression of them, as this study will show.

In my search for a critical path by which to approach Birney, I consulted the Canadian critics. With one or two exceptions, I found them unsatisfactory as guides because they have failed to come to terms with Birney's multeity and diversity. In dealing with a poet as problematical as Birney--for he is not only complex and varied in style and subject matter, but he varies and revises his poems, comments on them publicly, and diverts the critics with his strong personality--a definite critical approach is essential. Yet the Canadian critics' approach has generally been random, casual, and uncommitted. Thus a further purpose of this study is to show how the mountain approach--that is, examination of images, symbols, and diction in a selected group of poems--overcomes many of the problems Birney creates for the critics.

The approach I have come to use cuts across traditional time lines of "early" and "late" Birney; cuts across his varied poetic styles and forms--narrative, lyric, satiric, meditative, long, short, rhymed, unrhymed; and cuts across his various poetic stances--irony, humour, self-mockery, nostalgia, outrage, worship, expressionism, and straightforward description. Looking at mountain poems also allows a comparison of one or two of Birney's less successful poems with poems which can be considered his best. Thus some criteria for making such value judgments can be established. Yet another purpose of this study, then, is to illustrate, by close analysis of the mountain poems, Birney's craftsmanship as a poet.

A focus on the mountain--a single but complex image, experience, and symbol--thus offers a way to cope with the multeity of Birney's poetry without simplifying or distorting it. As Coleridge says in his essay "On

Poesy or Art":

> If in the midst of the variety there be not some fixed object for the attention, the unceasing succession of the variety will prevent the mind from observing the difference of the individual objects....In order to derive pleasure from the occupation of the mind, the principle of unity must always be present, so that in the midst of the multeity the centripetal force be never suspended, nor the sense be fatigued by the predominance of the centrifugal force. This unity in multeity I have elsewhere stated as the principle of beauty.[9]

CHAPTER II

PROBLEMS OF BIRNEY CRITICISM

Admittedly, the diversity and bulk of Birney's poetry have caused problems for the Canadian critics who must try to analyze his work. Yet if Birney really is, as Frank Davey concludes, "one of our most talented, conscientious, and versatile poets, if not to date our greatest",[1] then it is encumbent upon the critics to overcome these problems and give Birney the serious and extended critical examination he deserves. With a few exceptions, however, the Canadian critics have not given him his due.

Birney has suffered at the pens of the critics not from unkindness but from relative neglect. It is the aim of this chapter to examine the reasons for this surprising state of affairs. After an extensive analysis of Birney criticism I have come to several conclusions about Birney as a critical problem, and about problems of Canadian criticism in general as they affect criticism of Birney and his fellow Canadian poets. Birney himself as a subject of criticism causes most of the problems, but the critics themselves are not entirely blameless. I arrived at my own critical approach to Birney, an analysis of the mountain poems, through discovery of organic patterns within the poems. It is only one possible approach to Birney, of course, but it overcomes many of the problems I have discovered in Birney criticism as a whole.

In spite of its generally positive tenor, all of the Birney criticism published so far has been written out of only partial commitment to the poet. Thus there has been no full-length study of Birney; the critical work on him falls into four categories: the book review, the article, the handbook, and the chapter or half-chapter which forms part of a larger

study of several Canadian poets and/or novelists.

If we apply Aristotle to prose criticism, then a critical work should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The typical critical work on Birney begins by referring to his diversity and ends by saying he is one of Canada's best poets. In the middle is a book review.

That the bulk of Birney criticism is made up of actual book reviews is evident from looking at Bruce Nesbitt's 1974 critical anthology. Out of 44 critical views on Birney's poetry collected by Nesbitt, five are by Birney himself--three articles, a poem, and an epilogue. This leaves 39 items, five of which are letters to the editor, and one of which is a reply. Of the 33 articles remaining, 28 are book reviews. Two are book introductions,[2] one is part of a chapter from Jones' Butterfly on Rock, and two are full-length articles.[3] The uncollected Birney criticism shows similar proportions.

The form of the book review places harsh strictures on the reviewer. It must be short and descriptive, yet comprehensive. Within these limits, some critics manage to make two or three perceptive comments on individual poems or on Birney's career or personality. But the book review cannot be a full study even of the poems in one volume. Since the reader's interest must be whetted by an overview of the contents of a book, the first aim of the book review is description. Thus it invariably covers too much diverse material in too little space.

The necessity for description leads the reviewer of a diverse volume such as Selected Poems into certain pitfalls. Both A.J.M. Smith and Bruce Nesbitt,[4] for instance, use the six sections of Selected Poems as a point of organization for their own articles. The problem with this approach is that Selected Poems is such a mixed offering in itself, with so much

variety even within each of the six sections, that the reviewer has no chance to develop a unified theme, to consider one or two of Birney's formal styles or image patterns, or even to examine his chronological development as a poet. Consideration of Selected Poems section by section thus gives merely an arbitrary unity and organization to such a review, ignoring any organic patterns among the poems. It is essentially an ad hoc approach. Though both Smith and Nesbitt offer several tantalizing comments about individual poems and suggested themes,[5] they do not have the space to develop them. Thus the review articles in general are memorable mainly for their numerous unorganized details. The chaos of the world is reflected in Birney's poems as a whole, and the critic's review article becomes one more mirror of the chaos.

If a reviewer chooses to ignore the descriptive technique, as Milton Wilson does,[6] his review of Selected Poems becomes a series of unconnected notes--often personal likes and dislikes--about chronology, typography, revisions, Birney's personality and career, his ironies, and his anomalies. The book reviewers often choose to mention the obvious--Birney's typography. Wilson is joined by Smith, Wainwright, Carruth, and Paul West[7] in commenting on typography, and their discussions remain superficial because they do not consider in depth the aesthetics of concrete poetry which have led Birney to changes in typography. This penchant for subjective treatments of typography rather than getting to whatever may be the heart of Birney drives the American reviewer Albert Drake, in his brief but enthusiastic review of the first American collection of Birney, Memory No Servant, to say about the Canadian reviews of Selected Poems:

> There the critics lingered furiously over the only flaw they could find: Birney had removed all punctuation.[8]

Reviews of shorter volumes than Selected Poems suffer from the same limitations, for Birney has not produced single volumes on a unified theme or in a single style. Birney does not conceive of any of his individual volumes as a whole; it is a problem of book concept. There are analogies here with other Canadian poets: a good case can be made for the excellence of Atwood's Journals of Susanna Moodie and Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid as volumes with a singularity of vision that allows the poets' full powers to emerge, while in their other volumes their strengths are dispersed. Birney's strengths as a poet are perhaps hidden to some critics and general readers by the heterogeneity of his books. I for one would like to see a collection of Birney's mountain poems or Latin American poems, rather than further random collections.

Near False Creek Mouth is probably the most unified of Birney's volumes. It consists mainly of Latin American travel poems, plus the long meditative title poem, plus five "Canadian" poems tacked on at the end. It is thus no coincidence that one of the best review articles is by A. Kingsley Weatherhead on this very volume. He manages in four all-too-short pages[9] to give a thoughtful review by concentrating on "November Walk" for the first half of his article, considering the genre of the travel poem in the second half, and concluding with an incisive but undeveloped remark about the guilt theme in "November Walk" and "Wolfville".

In contrast, Milton Wilson's review of the same book shows his own virtuosity as a phrase-maker, but does not illuminate Birney's poems. He says, for instance, that Birney's

> ...Canadian landscape and manscape [is] a precarious shelf, thrust up at the sun between the Atlantic and Pacific doors of a prehistoric sea, layered with the discontinuous steps of geological and cultural time, haunted by the ghosts of unavailable primitive myth and the visions of unachieved humanity.[10]

The compression of many ideas and themes into one all-encompassing sentence is remarkably apt and skillful, but it is no substitute for close analysis of the poems. Wilson, like the other reviewers, has no space to develop his thought-provoking ideas.

To go through the reviews in detail would be to illustrate that the typical approach is ad hoc, and the typical book review a collage of undeveloped phrases and witty descriptions, such as Wilson's quoted above. Some reviewers are honest about their ad hoc approach;[11] others are not,[12] but their reviews are still patchy and unsatisfactory.

To be fair to the reviewers, Birney is, as I have already said, a difficult poet to deal with because of his variety and bulk. Again, the more straightforward reviewers state the problem directly, beginning their reviews with such phrases as "kaleidoscopic pattern",[13] "wider variety",[14] "long, fruitful, and varied poetic career",[15] "asymmetrical, bulky, unpredictable accumulation of poems",[16] and "considerable variety of forms and tones".[17] George Woodcock sums them all up, and alludes to Birney's poetic personality as well, by saying that Birney is "not willingly definitive about himself" and that "the future is always open with Birney".[18]

Not only does Birney present problems to the reviewer because of his eclecticism, but he constantly revises his poems and republishes old poems in new volumes. Several reviewers mention this fact,[19] some with annoyance and some with praise for Birney's openness to change as a facet of his personality.

In fact, the strength of Birney's personality diverts the critics much too often, presenting another critical problem. Consideration of the poetic personae in his work and consideration of his biography are

legitimate critical activities; but many of the reviewers seem to be mesmerized by Birney the man. Birney has certainly maintained a high profile through public readings, book prefaces, and books and articles about his craft of writing. The wise artist lets his work speak for itself. Birney the unwise chooses to publicize his poetry and his attitudes towards critics, creativity, teaching, and poetry in general. Furthermore, he is always entertaining in his writings and his public appearances, probably because he is often outrageous. Thus he invites the kind of criticism I call "personality criticism".

In Birney's case, his volatile and open personality is relevant to a critical examination of his poems, for he tinkers endlessly with them and delights in being the bibliographers' bane. Perhaps the only way to explain omission of several important poems from Collected Poems--for instance "Trial of A City", "there are delicacies", "like an eddy", "the marriage", "children's prayer to Santa"--is that he simply felt like leaving them out to annoy the critics.

I am not purist enough to suggest that no mention should ever be made of Birney's personality. I enjoy his public personality and the spirit of fun which urges him to write such delights as "PNOME 1971", "poet-tree 2", and "fine arts"--all indicative of a refusal to take himself too seriously. What his private personality is, I don't know.

But an overemphasis on personality leads to an underemphasis on the poems themselves. A curious thing happens to many of Birney's critics. Since Canada has a rather small literary establishment, I gather that most of the critics know Birney personally. Faced with the many problems his poetry presents, and forced to make an interesting statement about him in the short space of a book review, several reviewers

choose to find unity or definitiveness in his personality, if none can be found in his work. A.J.M. Smith goes so far as to entitle his article "A Unified Personality", and other reviews show a similar focus on the man: Colombo's "Poetic Ambassador", Wilson's "Poet Without a Muse", West's "Earle Birney and the Compound Ghost". Birney the man has actually become an obstacle between critic and poem.[20]

This focus on personality criticism may be a feature of Canadian literary criticism in general. George Woodcock suggests as much in his introduction to A Choice of Critics: Selections from 'Canadian Literature'. While explaining his criteria for selecting the best of seven years of his periodical Canadian Literature, Woodcock discusses what he considers to be the distinctive character of Canadian criticism. His comments reveal a focus on the personality of writer and critic:

> The essays are notably idiosyncratic, and each of them projects a clear image of the critic as a literary personality. In many cases the judgements in the essays are presented as the more or less direct products of personal experience.[21]

Among his examples, Woodcock mentions that Paul West

> ...plunges into a discussion of Earle Birney with a sharply cut vignette of the poet as he remembers seeing him first at the lectern 'saying' his poems.[22]

Woodcock becomes even more definite about the personality-consciousness of Canadian criticism when he says that its characteristic form is the intimate dialogue between author and critic, with the reader drawn gently into the discussion by the "atmosphere of intimacy".[23] Woodcock's nationalistic defence of this cosy situation seems to make pure analysis of poetry or fiction a matter, almost, of dishonour.

Yet Woodcock is uncomfortable as a flag-waving nationalist. He tries to defend his position against the charge of "the provincial

incestuousness of the Canadian literary world"[24] by saying that narrowness and sterility can be and is prevented by recruiting critics from outside Canada. He tries to prove the international standards of Canadian criticism by naming critics (himself, Paul West, Warren Tallman) who "learned their critical skills in foreign environments" and have "helped to introduce more rigorous and objective critical attitudes".[25] But by praising objectivity and rigour, he is now arguing against his previous praise of intimacy and personal experience in criticism. Thus I find his position shifting and unclear.

Woodcock suggests that a "compact and self-contained literary tradition"[26] can exist "without in any way detracting from the achievements of individual writers".[27] Yet I have found, to my dismay, that the achievement of the individual writer Earle Birney has not been examined rigorously, objectively, and completely; and Woodcock himself admits that no one has given Layton his due.

The article by Paul West which Woodcock includes in his anthology is not, to my mind, anywhere near an adequate critical study of Birney. West, for all his personal and intimate tone, succeeds only in chiding Birney for not being Eliot, Williams, or Pound, yet at the same time for using un-Canadian subject matter. West's article is mainly, like many of the book reviews, elegant phrase-making and clever exposure of his own personality; it does not illuminate the poems.

When he does comment on particular poems, he is vague and unenlightening. For instance, this is what he says about "David":

> ...the key to Birney's power...is his urge towards myth. This is why his Canadian pastorals never quite succeed. Because he is a lover of myth, he tends naturally to the dislocated reality of mountaineering and the lost reality of the Indians.[28]

It is unclear whether he means "David" is a myth or a failed Canadian pastoral; both terms are left undefined. West similarly fails to define "dislocated reality" or "lost reality". Though the phrases sound impressive, they have little concrete value. Perhaps because of the shortness of the article, but more I suspect because West is not committed to a full critical study of Birney, his article is an example of unhelpful and unsatisfactory criticism.

One would assume that if the Canadian critics were given a longer format to work in than the book review or article, they would be able to offer in-depth criticism of Birney. Two handbooks on Birney have been written, but they are still not long enough.

The only two longer studies of Birney, by Frank Davey and Richard Robillard, were each written in 1971 as part of a series of critical handbooks. Their aim, therefore, was mainly to provide an introduction to the poet and an overview of his work. Since both were also written to fill a publisher's specified format,[29] it is again clear that only partial commitment to the poet is involved.

The "General Editor's Note" which prefaces the Robillard study warns of its limitations and apologizes for its incompleteness before Robillard even begins:

> This series is not designed to be definitive...but the task of even a preliminary survey is especially difficult with writers as prolific and complex as Earle Birney, working in different forms and constantly moving onward, before the critics have had time to properly analyse and assess the previous work.[30]

It is not time, but commitment which the critics have lacked. It is 11 years since Selected Poems and two years since Collected Poems, and there are still no rumours of a major study.[31]

One can almost make a final judgment as to the relative merits of Robillard's book and Davey's book by examining their prose styles. Both critics say much in detail that I would agree with, and some that I would disagree with. But Davey's book is more helpful and more rigorous criticism because it is written in simple and direct prose. Thus the reader can distinguish a clear argument and structure in Davey's study, whereas Robillard's main lines of thought get lost in a plethora of academic jargon.

The contrast between the two books illustrates two basic critical responses to Birney's poetry. One (Robillard's) is panic and bewilderment; the other (Davey's) is a cool but necessary attempt at categorization and simplification, a narrow but clear-eyed approach to three basic aspects of Birney--his style, his humanism, and his myth-making. Davey also offers a fairly close study of four long poems: "David", "The Damnation of Vancouver", "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", and "The Mammoth Corridors". While these poems could still be further analyzed, Davey's discussion is a good first step towards extensive criticism of them.

I have found Davey's discussion of Birney's style especially helpful, and have used it to support my own conclusions about Birney's use of concrete rather than abstract diction. Davey makes an excellent case for the progressive simplification of Birney's technique. He shows how Birney's lyrics change from the particular in David and Other Poems to the overview in Strait of Anian, and return to the particular in Trial of a City and especially Ice Cod Bell or Stone. In Trial of a City, for instance, he says:

> Birney indulges in much less interpretation of reality than in his previous volume. He is no longer telling the reader what to believe, but...is once again reporting experience piercingly and vigorously.[32]

Davey says that Birney continues this change in style in Ice Cod Bell or Stone, and his description of that change is clear and precise:

> Birney's style is visibly altered....Birney's fondness for generalizing has become a fondness for particular people and scenes, even for anecdotes. His fondness for pontificating has become a willingness to discover and be taught. His desire for overview has dissolved into a town-by-town investigation of rural Mexico. Concern with external form has become concern with organic form. The pronoun 'I' has completely replaced 'we'. Rhetoric has for the most part yielded to conversational diction and rhythms....That is not to say that Birney's transformation is total. 'Can Lit' is essentially an abstract statement, and 'Twenty-Third Flight' shows that the poet's love for rhetoric has not died.[33]

Thus Davey shows that Birney the particularist, the poet I presented in my introductory chapter, has not always been so. Especially his early work often displays lapses into abstraction. The poet of direct experience cleanly rendered had to discard a tendency towards generalizing that experience. It is significant, however, that the two examples Davey offers of Birney the abstracter are satirical poems. Thus my original contention holds true: Birney the poet of direct experience is not the same as Birney the satirist.

Davey continues his discussion of Birney's style in some detail, and concludes it by offering the following standard for Birney's poems:

> The stylistic virtues of the best Birney poems of both his early and later periods are a clarity of syntax and a precision of diction.[34]

It is this clarity and precision, Birney in full command of "le mot juste", which I find in most of the mountain poems.

Davey advances a good discussion of Birney's humanism, a theme which unites his lyric poetry and social commentary. He also attempts a discussion of myth in Birney's poetry, but ends up talking about Birney's romanticism instead. His study at 73 pages (for only the last two

chapters are devoted to Birney's poetry) is still too short, and he has some unexamined and hidden assumptions,[35] but his study is valuable for its treatment of style and humanism. And he always writes clearly, focusing not on his own phrase-making abilities but on Birney's poetry.

In contrast, Robillard's book is marred throughout by a pompous style of writing. His ideas are not clear, but he expresses them nevertheless in the worst of academic jargon. His introduction is vaguely thematic; his study is mainly stylistic with many technical terms. How the two relate is never made clear.

Robillard's thematic introduction has the same faults as several of the book reviews: it offers too many unrelated ideas in too short a space. His formal analysis is mainly descriptive. He usually identifies rhythm, metre, alliteration, assonance, and so on, without showing what end the technicalities serve. Occasionally, his analysis is even wrong-headed. For instance, he says about the first two stanzas of "David" that alliteration and assonance cause "the consonants and vowels to halloo and cry; thus the w's of lines 2 and 3, the m's of line 7, and the s's of line 8."[36] If those softest of consonants, w's and m's, can "halloo and cry", it's a surprise to me. Even s's do not halloo and cry, for they are too constricted and quiet to have the necessary open sound.

Robillard's substitution of jargon for analysis can be illustrated by his comment about "Hands":

> Its radical contrast is between the 'hands' of trees and those of civilized warring men. Granted any situation, this contrast would still be hard to sustain convincingly, but one notes that the attempt is made.[37]

"Radical" is one of those slippery words which Robillard overuses without telling the reader what he means by it. The second sentence quoted merely fills paper.

The Robillard study begins and ends abruptly, with no central idea, no clear introduction or conclusion. He offers only a floundering collection of jargonized description which again fails to illuminate Birney's purpose or methods.[38] But "one notes that the attempt is made".

Davey hesitates to evaluate Birney as great; he simply ends by saying that Birney is "one of...".[39] Robillard makes no final statement; he skips here and there among the poems describing the many varieties of Birney he finds. Neither critic sees the poems in groups or patterns. They are seen instead as discrete objects and discussed phenomenologically, each an entity unto itself. My own discussion of the mountain poems takes a different view--that the poems should be read together. Robillard and Davey finally offer no single or clear view of the elusive and protean Birney. In truth, such a clear and simple view of Birney does not exist. He is a highly individual (though not idiosyncratic) poet, as the reviewers who are mesmerized by his personality attest.

Thus we return to the intractability of Birney's poetry as a collection of particulars. The last type of Birney criticism, a thematic treatment of a carefully selected and usually small segment of his poems, is of far less help in approaching Birney than the book review, article, or handbook. The pages in Atwood's Survival, Jones' Butterfly on Rock, and W. H. New's Articulating West subordinate the individual and complex nature of Birney's poetry to the larger thematic concerns of the books as a whole. Inevitably, distortion results.

The long thematic study has become another common characteristic of Canadian criticism.[40] The prototype of such studies is of course Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, and the following objection to Frye applies equally to Atwood, New, et al:

> Literary works and their authors merit a mention in Frye's book only by qualifying as examples of something or other in his system: it is the system which is the insight, the vision of literature in its entirety as a vast spatial design, beautiful in its coherence, autonomous, and ultimately autotelic.[41]

In a 1976 article, "Surviving the Paraphrase", Frank Davey notes and regrets a Canadian preference for thematic criticism:

> It is a testimony to the limitations of Canadian literary criticism that thematic criticism should have become the dominant approach to English-Canadian literature. In its brief lifetime, Canadian criticism has acquired a history of being reluctant to focus on the literary work--to deal with matters of form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as these arise from the work as a unique contrast. It has seldom enough confidence in the work of Canadian writers to do what criticism of other national literatures has done: explain and illuminate the work on its own terms, without recourse to any cultural rationalizations or apologies.[42]

To illustrate that thematic criticism has been unfair to Birney in particular, I offer two examples.

The first is from D.G. Jones' Butterfly on Rock, which presents Canadian literature in terms of Old Testament archetypes. He compares Birney and Layton in their treatment of the mountain image, and makes the following simplistic assumption about two complex poets on the basis of one poem by each:

> The appearance, I suspect, of this image in two poems, one by Birney, one by Layton, would seem to confirm Birney's pessimism and Layton's optimism. In Birney's poem 'Bushed' the isolated man is finally destroyed by an increasingly alien and hostile nature, which at the end of the poem takes on the form of the mountain in its darkest guise....
>
> Layton's 'Mount Rolland' presents a more positive version by far. Here the mountain is opposed to a commercial and industrial society which tries to tame it.[43]

Jones here fails to recognize what is most basic about "Bushed": that the mountain is an invention of the trapper's mind, like the rainbow in the poem. Thus the mountain does not simply represent an "alien and

hostile nature". Furthermore, Jones makes no mention of the many other mountain poems--and other Birney poems, for that matter--which undercut what he calls "Birney's pessimism", and I suspect that Layton is not as simply positive as Jones makes him out to be.

William H. New devotes a whole chapter to Birney in Articulating West. He begins promisingly by lamenting the fact that Birney has received no full-length study, rightly identifying Birney's "apparent eclecticism"[44] as the probable reason for this neglect. But the rest of his chapter does not fill this gap in Canadian criticism. He presents an elaborate system of reconciliation of opposites; but how his theory applies to Birney's poems is never "articulated", for his prose, like Robillard's, distintegrates into academic jabberwocky:

> While to acknowledge personal and cultural mortality without some sense of direction would again be to invoke despair, to refuse at all to participate in temporal reality would be inconsistent with [Birney's] social conscience and sensory perceptions. He must therefore reconcile the two stances without compromising his integrity. The ironic stance taken in so many of the poems, distancing the speaker from the absurdities of the temporal-material society, provides one kind of answer, but no resolution. The options enunciated by the chauvinist truck driver in 'Billboards Build Freedom of Choice'... utter a false dichotomy, which the poet cannot accept as the basic tension informing modern life.[45]

If this is "articulating west", send me east. Would the truck driver recognize himself as "enunciating options" which "utter a false dichotomy"? Heavens, no. What has happened to New is total loss of clarity. He loses his thought--and Birney's poem--in a muddle of words, and fails to communicate at all. Thus he does Birney the ultimate disservice.

New's problem is that he has gone much too far from Birney's poems, which are the exact opposite of New's pretentious academic language. New has become mesmerized by his own paraphrases, and has forgotten the poems

themselves. Another comment by Davey is relevant to Articulating West:

> The movement here is towards paraphrase--paraphrase of the culture and paraphrase of the literature. The critic extracts for his deliberations the paraphrasable content and throws away the form. He attends to the explicit meaning of the work and neglects whatever content is implicit in its structure, language, or imagery.[46]

In his excellent article, Davey suggests various alternatives to thematic criticism--historical criticism, analytical criticism, genre criticism, phenomenological criticism, archetypal criticism. Above all, however, he wants to "turn the critic's attention back to where the writer's must always be--on literature as language, and on writing as writing."[47]

This is indeed where my attention is focused in the mountain poems: not on Birney's personality, not on Birney as an exemplification of a particular aspect of Canadian culture, but simply on the diction, imagery, and narrative details of his mountain poems, and whatever thematic concerns they may suggest.

CHAPTER III

AN ALTERNATIVE CRITICAL APPROACH

If one word could be used to describe Birney criticism, that word would be "tentative". The critics are unwilling, or unable in a short space, to give Birney unqualified praise or attention. Thus he is continually called "one of our best writers" or "one of our most attractive personalities"--safe but faint praise. The critics simply don't believe in him enough. After all, he isn't a genius, they say. He has no worldwide acceptance, they say. And so they continue to do their duty, reviewing his books promptly and happily, saying good things about his person and his poetry, but never giving him the commitment of a full-length study written out of a love and respect for his work, whatever its flaws. They are afraid to be whole-hearted in their commitment, much less their praise. It is, to quote Frank Davey again, a question of confidence:

> Canadian criticism...has seldom enough confidence in the work of Canadian writers to do what criticism of other national literatures has done: explain and illuminate the work on its own terms....[1]

In this chapter, I intend to offer a way to overcome this final critical problem of lack of belief, lack of faith in Birney as a poet. I have looked at some criticism of writers outside Canada, and I present one study which exemplifies the attitude of faith which I find missing in Birney criticism.

In total contrast to the Canadian tentativeness is a study of the Irish poet Yeats by the American critic Donald Stauffer: The Golden Nightingale, published in 1949. With complete confidence in the worth of his endeavor--since Yeats is certainly a bona fide subject for study and recognition--Stauffer writes about Yeats' poetry with clarity and conviction. Certain that Yeats is a great poet, he feels free to comment

on the universals and essences of poetry, and how Yeats embodies these in his individual way. He says, for instance that the poet always searches for truth:

> In the search for truth, the poet proceeds into mystery. He is endowed with hope and with love. In creating possibilities, in inventing a world which may be, or many worlds which may be, he sets forth his faith, his belief. And his search for truth presents, finally, the most faithful description we have of the human condition: our consciousness accepting the particulars of the world, surrounded by mysteries, and given form and direction by an act of the mind in the creation of infinite possibilities.[2]

I see Birney as a poet searching for the same kind of truth, but I do not see the Canadian critics identifying him as such. When I read Stauffer, I am envious, simply because Canadian critics do not have the same confidence to write about an accomplished and wide-ranging poet of their own tradition. Stauffer is free to speculate on eternals; Canadian critics fret about book design, describe individual problems hastily, or see a few of Birney's poems as a small spoke in the great Canadian wheel. To display heart is unforgivable: they may talk of personal acquaintance with Birney, but to say he is one of a long line of true poets is to gallop too fast and too recklessly.

The kind of book Birney deserves, then, is a full-length study paying close attention to his poems--a book like Stauffer's, though not exactly like, for Birney is not Yeats (though he has shown his admiration for Yeats by taking the title of Rag & Bone Shop from "The Circus Animals' Desertion").

Added to the problems caused by Birney's bulk and variety, his strong personality, his habit of revising poems, the form of the book review and the monograph, and the penchant of Canadian critics for

thematic and personality criticism, then, is the problem of belief. I suggest three ways to overcome this disbelief. One is simply to say "I believe" and proceed from there--which is enough for me. The second and third ways are more rationally acceptable: one can adopt the attitude either of the philosopher Vaihinger or the poet Coleridge.

In the Biographia Literaria Coleridge speaks of "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."[3] Since then, the phrase has become a central expression of the audience's and the critic's belief in the poetic illusion. The word "willing" indicates a leap of faith--a faith in the poet's integrity and essential truth.

A related idea is forwarded by H. Vaihinger in a book called The Philosophy of 'As If'.[4] Basically, Vaihinger says that man creates fictions or hypotheses to allow him to cope with and live in the world, and that there is nothing wrong with this. These fictions are not lies but the most workable errors. It is a philosophy, if you will, of pragmatism.[5]

Coleridge also points out in the Biographia Literaria that even philosophy and mathematics proceed by postulates:

> The word postulate is borrowed from the science of mathematics. In geometry the primary construction is not demonstrated, but postulated....The mathematician does not begin with a demonstrable proposition, but with an intuition, a practical idea.[6]

I undertook my analysis of Birney with the intuition that the mountain approach to Birney is a practical way to give his poetry its due without "covering" all of his poems, yet demonstrating his strengths as a poet by explicating the mountain ethos he presents.

Thus I wish to apply the philosophy of "as if" and the "willing suspension of disbelief" to the problem of belief in Birney as an artist.

I will proceed "as if" Birney were a great poet, and give his mountain poems the kind of close critical attention Stauffer gives to Yeats. I "willingly suspend my disbelief" in his greatness; thus the problem of confidence is removed.

Though it may seem foolish to make the leap of faith which the Canadian critics have been reluctant to make, I offer Yeats as my apologist:

> God guard me from the thoughts men think
> In the mind alone;
> He that sings a lasting song
> Thinks in a marrow-bone;
>
> From all that makes a wise old man
> That can be praised of all;
> O what am I that I should not seem
> For the song's sake a fool?
>
> I pray--for fashion's word is out
> And prayer comes round again--
> That I may seem, though I die old,
> A foolish, passionate man.[7]

* * * * * * * * * *

The analytical method which Stauffer uses to read Yeats's poems (but to read them always with heart) is the same method I have found useful and natural in reading Birney. The method is not unique to Stauffer, but is quite common in modern criticism: David Perkins uses a similar method for reading Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth; Wolfgang Clemen for Shakespeare; Rosemund Tuve for Milton; and Barbara Hardy for George Eliot.[8] The method is to trace images--some of which may become symbols--throughout a poet's work. The assumption is--and the above critics have proven it to be correct--that knowledge of all the poems enhances understanding of each individual poem. By thus reading poems in groups, a particular image or symbol grows in richness

and complexity as it is seen in various contexts.

Stauffer is guided in his approach by statements of Yeats setting forth his poetic beliefs. While Birney often comments on the craft of poetry, particularly in The Cow Jumped Over the Moon and The Creative Writer, he has no completely developed aesthetic of poetry. His only devotion is to the craft of words; no idea, belief, style, or system, however complex, has been enunciated by Birney. All he finally says is this:

> One comes down eventually to the only surety: one's knowledge of one's own little craft. My experiences are all I have to be certain about. Let me be honest. There are times when I've got down and merely whittled a piece of verse, to hear a shape come, then throw it away, or times when I've been piano-practising, only trying to get the hang of the form of a sestina, or the breath-accent and heart-beat of a Black Mountain line-series. But mostly I've been impelled--impelled sometimes merely by one acute sense-impression, which started a chain of recalls back to an experience which, I could now apprehend, was emotionally important for me.[9]

It is a modest, ad hoc approach to the poet's role, an approach which disallows any large or grand design in his poetry.

While there is no overall pattern in Birney's work, however, there are several smaller patterns. The mountain poems are simply one of several important groups of poems; others include Latin American poems, travel poems, civilization poems, poetry-reading poems, Anglo-Saxon poems, war poems, sea poems, wind and breath poems, poems of balance, dance poems, love poems, Canadian satires and other satiric poems, and escape poems. Needless to say, the categories are not rigid, and they overlap.

Stauffer explains the advantage of reading Yeats's lyrics as a group, and he demonstrates:

> how necessary to an understanding of any one poem of Yeats is some knowledge of at least the main body of His poems....through his technique of echoing and repetition and allusion to his own work, Yeats has built his characteristic pieces--consciously and for the first time in English literature with complete success--to a point where the lyric, that slight form if words alone are counted, is on an equal plane with the epic and the drama in dignity and power.[10]

Certainly Birney's mountain poems gain in force and power as their cumulative effect begins to make itself known.

There is no evidence, however, that Birney consciously uses the technique of "echoing and repetition and allusion to his own works". He has repeatedly stated that the poet is a bit of a madman, working through instinct, seeking to appease or exorcise ghosts which haunt him.[11] Yet the process need not be conscious, for as Yeats believed, "A poet gradually comes to adopt as his own the symbols from which his instincts cannot escape".[12] If this is true, Birney should display some kind of unity of images or symbols in his work. It is my contention that the mountain is not only a central image in Birney's work, it is his "first and simplest symbol".[13] The final aim of this study is to show how the mountain attains the full force of a symbol, as Yeats and others have defined that term.

Stauffer explains and quotes Yeats on the relationship between a poet's personality and his symbols:

> Only very slowly does a poet discover his own symbols.... But an artist's personality is unwavering--'I do not think men change much in their deepest thought'--and once discovered, the artist may build from his symbols a house without hands, in which he may rest at home.... 'There is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom speaks first in images, and...this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul'.[14]

The "one scene" which is vitally important in Birney's work is the

mountain, and the "one adventure" is climbing the mountain. It is no accident that Birney's first published poem--and still considered one of his best--is the mountain poem "David".

That "David" is perhaps the instinctual core of Birney's work may be proven by the fact that when he was preparing to go to war, with the real prospect of dying, he wanted to express in poetry some of what he felt in his deepest soul. In The Cow Jumped Over the Moon he recounts how he took reckoning of his life and his poetry at the age of 36:

> There was still a work I had not got at, an area of my experience I longed to contain in words while I still had a chance. I didn't know what it was, even whether it was to be in verse or prose, but it had to be something that moved beyond the immediate dualities of war and peace into a world more universal, and yet also more personal....I began to see that it was the passing of my youth I was mourning, which peace would not bring back, not to me or any of my generation. I felt a deep need, a compulsion, to express this inevitable change from carefree happiness, this loss that none escapes unless he die young. In my case I had lost both my youngness and that western wilderness which had made my early joys so rare and intense. Or so I say now, long after. In 1940 I was not so prosily aware of what I was feeling; the poem was still a vague fluid washing around in my mind.[15]

When his vague washings crystallized, the image of the mountain emerged:

> I was overwhelmed with insight into my obsession, into what I had to write about before the army bore me out of Canada. Mountains. I had to unburden myself about mountains--their beauty and their hostility; about my peaks and all the sweating exhilarations and adventures and shivers of climbing them; about the misadventures, small as mine had been.
>
> ...It wasn't, please note, that I wanted to make moral comments like 'gather ye rosebuds while ye may' or 'beware the awful avalanche' or anything else designed to change a reader's life-style. I simply wanted to represent certain realities of life which the climbing of mountains could symbolize. And above all, I wanted to make the mountains as real in words as they had continued to be in wordless memory in my mind.[16]

Birney actually uses the word "symbolize" in his account of his discovery of the mountain's importance to him. But he also stresses that the direct experience must remain in the foreground.

Birney's account is in close accordance with what Yeats says in The Cutting of an Agate about a poet's instinctive use of symbolic images:

> I am...certain that a man should find his Holy Land where he first crept upon the floor, and that familiar woods and rivers should fade into symbol with so gradual a change that he never discover, no, not even in ecstasy itself, that he is beyond space, and that time alone keeps him from Primum Mobile, Supernal Eden, Yellow Rose over all.[17]

Birney goes on to relate how mountains are indeed the place "where he first crept upon the floor":

> ...I'd begun my scrambles on the slopes above Banff at the age of seven, and for the next fifteen years I'd scarcely ever been out of sight of mountains. I'd fished in the canyons of the Kootenays, pack-horsed into lakes in the remoter parts of Banff National Park and guided tourists up its ranges, hunted fossils on cliffs for a museum, strung meteorological cable up Sulphur Mountain, worked as a swamper, rock-driller and ditch-digger around the Vermilion Lakes and as axeman and rodman to surveyors on the Continental Divide. In college days I'd climbed with the B.C. Mountaineering Club and other parties over glaciers and icefields on the Pacific, bobsleighed down the mountains of Utah, and rock-climbed in Wales and in the Sierras.[18]

So far does biography go in explaining the origins of symbols. As Birney moved away from Canada, as he grew older, he climbed other mountains, literally and symbolically. He has not devoted his life to mountain climbing but to poetry and teaching, and his poems display many other images and symbols. But the mountain is still rooted in Birney's original and deepest needs. It is, I suggest, the iconic core of his work.

CHAPTER IV

EARLY MOUNTAIN POEMS

> Seductive ever are mountains and rivers,
> luring even the heroes of history to fall at their feet.[1]

All of Earle Birney's poems start from "David". It contains the seed crystal of themes, images, and concerns which Birney expresses throughout his 40-year career. Yet to my knowledge, it has always been considered by critics as a poem unrelated to Birney's later work.

I begin my analysis of the mountain poems with a close examination of "David", using its images and narrative details as the touchstone for a group of related poems which includes such obvious poems as "Conrad Kain", "Climbers", and "Biography", but also such surprising poems, perhaps, as "Man on a Tractor", "Machu Picchu", and "Four Feet Between".[2] The details I choose to focus on may seem arbitrary or obvious at the present time, but they form the skeleton for my discussion of the other mountain poems.

Some of the later poems contain most of the images and details in "David"; some contain only one or two, in which case the links with "David" may seem rather tenuous. In this way, however, the advantage is gained of comparing poems which would normally be thought of as discrete and unrelated. But is this not the art of poetry itself--to make fresh and surprising connections? As this chapter proceeds, I shall flesh out the skeleton I have presented, so that the richness and complexity of the mountain poems are revealed.

Part I of "David" (CP I, 107) lays out the basic situation of the poem; it also introduces the escape theme which will recur in Birney's later work. David and Bobbie work "all week in the valley for wages...

but over the sunalive week-ends" they climb. Birney is often concerned with this work-leisure rhythm in human lives. In this poem, since work is in the valley and climbing on the mountains, an up-down movement is associated with the rhythm, and becomes the first feature of what I call the mountain ethos. The climbing is not simply a rest or a change--it is an escape from the unpleasantness of the valley situation, with its "wail of mosquitoes" and "snoring under the fetid tents".

Part I also mentions the "joy in our lengthening coltish muscles" which David and Bobbie feel; legs and feet and the activities of running, walking, dancing, aching, and climbing are a second feature of the mountain poems. Along with legs go stairs: mountains are "Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats". In other words, the mountains achieve their importance because they are climbed by people. There is no meditation here on the 'rockness' of mountains; no celebration of mountains as things in themselves. The poem says that "Mountains were made for David to see over", and it is clear that it is the relationship between mountains and people which is significant. Thus the mountain is not just an image; it is image plus action, noun plus verb, the man climbing the mountain.

Part I gives us two aspects of the sun: it is the source of life and energy and warmth in the phrase "sunalive week-ends", but it is also unreachable, hiding, in the phrase "sun's retreats". The imagery of light which is so prominent in this poem affirms the importance of the sun as the goal above the mountain peak, but already in the opening stanzas of the poem Birney is hinting that it is unattainable.

Part II gives us details of the domestic joys of the climb: resting by a "curling lake" and grilling bacon "festooned/ On a poplar prong." Later in the poem, on another climb, they fry trout. They sleep under

the stars and wake in the dawn: the sun's progression is always noted in the poem. They reach "the slopes above timber", a place of peace and purity far away from mosquitoes. Finally they reach the snow, the next step upward, and the peak is sighted at last:

> The peak was upthrust
> Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled
> Into valleys the moon could be rolled in.

This peak is a fist, and the one on Sawback is The Finger; both are examples of the humanizing of the mountain, but what is more important is the gesture of defiance which both represent.

That the fist is frozen in an ocean of rock is also important. The rock is thus more fluid than it seems, less hard and eternal. In Part IV, the mountains are again described in oceanic terms:

> There it was too that David
> Taught me to read the scroll of coral in limestone
> And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,
> Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.

The frozen ocean also delivers messages from the prehistoric past to those who have the skill to decipher them. Communication across thousands of generations of life is a theme we will meet again in Birney's poems--most strikingly perhaps in "Mammoth Corridors". The prints of the grizzly appear just before the lines quoted above; when we consider the grizzly which is latent in man's nature in "Time Bomb", we see that Birney is already establishing a kinship between the trilobite, the grizzly, and the man who all leave their tracks on the mountain. The trilobite and the grizzly have also left their tracks on modern man, as we will come to realize in later poems. Thus Birney suggests that on the mountain, in the wilderness, a person begins to realize the oneness of all living creatures.

In Part VII the ice melting becomes mountain-like--"a gurgling world of crystal and ice-blue chasms", while the seracs of ice shine "like

frozen salt-green waves". Thus in the midst of the mountains, far indeed away from the sea, we can hear the unspoken rhythms of the sea.

In Part III, David teaches Bobbie "how time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments/Remembered from poets". The important word here, at least from my point of view, is "knife-edge"--a place of balance which is dangerous to say the least. In Part V the danger of sharp steel is again juxtaposed with the image of balance, as David:

> Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
> Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
> Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked

The image of legs floundering in empty space gives the reader the queasiness one feels in a plummeting elevator. Note, however, that Birney uses no metaphor here. He presents the image bare and direct, which gives a sense of immediacy to the situation.

Part IV gives us an image of a scarred pine, which combines two of the images we have already seen: the upthrusting peak, since the pine imitates the upward defiance of the fist as does the peak; and the sharpness of the knife-edge and the ice-pick, since the pine has been "spirally scarred by lightning". Through association, then, the scarred pine attains the force of a fist scarred, a human hand torn and healed by time. This of course becomes important later in the poem; and the tender and vulnerable flesh of the human hand appears again with unusual force in the poignant lines of "El Greco: Espolio":

> There is the problem of getting the holes exact
> ...and deep enough to hold the spikes
> after they've sunk through those bared feet
> and inadequate wrists... (CP I, 179)

The flesh ripped and pierced is an image that moves disturbingly and quietly through many of Birney's poems, constantly reminding us of the

fragility of the human body. The impaled bacon and the trout caught "by the forks of the spray" are a mundane expression of this idea in "David"; the skull and splayed white ribs of the mountain goat caught on a rock and the wing-broken robin are more obvious expressions of the eventual ripping of David's flesh, and even of Bobbie's in the last part of the poem when he "fell with a shriek on [his] shoulder".

Part VII has the boys trying to sleep by a bottle-green lake "under the cold breath of the glacier". The glacier is part of the mountain ethos, and in this poem as in others it breathes and has a snout: it is alive and moving, not inert. In Part VII we also see "the moon-light etching the Finger" and recall how the "frozen ocean of rock...swirled into valleys the moon could be rolled in".

The importance of breath and balance are shown in Part VII at the climax of the poem. When David loses his handhold, Birney's comment takes the breath away: "Without/A gasp he was gone." Here Birney uses enjambement to underscore the meaning. The word "Without" appears by itself at the end of a stanza, and across the gap of white space, the sentence is finished--"a gasp he was gone." It happens quickly, unexpectedly, the same way the fall breaks the rhythm of David's life--and Bobbie's.

After the "sound of grating/ Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones" the poet returns us to the quietness of breath swallowed:

> ...the lone
> Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only
> the wind and the muted beat of unknowing cascades.

For this moment, time and space are suspended: it is the fulcrum of the whole poem. To emphasize the quietness of the moment, Birney uses plain and spare diction in the whole stanza, except for the "grating

edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones", which are rightly described in harsher sounds because they are the only sounds to be heard and thus are magnified. In the very last line, the word "cascades" stands out when Bobbie finally becomes aware of the sound of water. Yet it is also the sound of his own blood rushing that he hears, for the sound is described as a "muted beat" like the beating of the heart. The identification of blood rushing and cascades of water is not at all forced when we consider such other poems as "Man is a Snow":

> not the rivers we foul but our blood
> o cold and more devious rushing (CP I, 100)

Similarly, the "wind" which Bobbie hears is identified with the sound of his breathing.

Part VIII begins with Bobbie "calling and getting no answer but echoes". Though Birney keeps the poem strictly within the realm of direct experience, on occasion he uses single words and phrases to allude to historical and literary backgrounds of his mountain ethos. In this case, Birney is making excellent and subtle use of the ancient pastoral elegy tradition already established in Part VII:

> ...David spotted
> Bighorns across the moraine and sent them leaping
> With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks
> And the peaks to the sun...

David and Bobbie thus become two more in a long line of shepherd boys who sing and call out to each other in the joy of friendship, and when one of them is gone the other calls alone and hears only his own voice echoed.[3] Though the phrases occur naturally within the context of the narrative, for those readers who are aware of such a background the poem is enriched. Yet Birney's use of this detail from the pastoral elegy tradition also has another purpose: to reinforce the principle

of balance and pairing in the call and the echo. The symmetry is not exact, however, just as the symmetrical images in Part IX are dark and empty echoes of the images encountered on the climb up.

In Part VIII Birney refers to David's face as "strangely unmarred", though his body is ripped. Later, in "The Gray Woods Exploding", we will see the scarred face of a man who continues to live, and the image of scars becomes very significant in that poem. Here, the unscarred face is an ironic comparison with the broken body, and it also emphasizes David's youth.

Part VIII also gives the unforgettable details of the maiming of David's body.[4] The "cruel fang of the ledge thrust in his back" gives the rock an animal viciousness. A few lines later, Bobbie tears his shirt into strips:

> I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid
>
> From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting lichens,
> And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore

The lichens drink in the blood of the victim, and the rock is covered with his blood. I do not suggest that David is a Christ figure, but rather that in the later "El Greco: Espolio" Christ becomes a David figure; that is, Birney focuses in that poem, as here, on the vulnerability of human flesh.

Later in the stanza, the idea of balance is rendered in concrete terms as David expresses his wish to die. The reason? He is suspended between living and dying, unable to move, to act, to do anything. To be balanced on the knife-edge forever would be the worst kind of hell for him. A wheelchair means absence of positive action, and action is the only kind of living David can conceive of--the direct encounter with the world.

As Bobbie stumbles and runs back into the valley, all the images of the ascent recur in a symmetrical fashion, but the mirror image is dark and twisted and melancholic. For instance, the bergschrund of the glacier, first described only in technical terms, is now a "grave-cold maw", an enormous image of voracity which was foreshadowed in the tiny but insistent mouths of the "thirsting lichens", and repeated in the image of the "gaping greenthroated crevasses". All of these give an ironic twist to the happy eating of bacon and trout. Bobbie passes the tree line and the lake on the way down, but they have now become "spectral larches" and a "glooming lake".

The final stanza has a mood of quietness established by Birney's use of plain, ordinary, empty diction, except for the single word "incurious" which describes the clouds. Thus the final emphasis is on the neutrality of nature. The last line uses the word "last" twice, and thus gives an appropriate finality to the poem--without explaining or consoling, however. At moments of deepest emotion, Birney's voice is characteristically quiet, emptied of all images and ideas and vividness. His understatement is so quiet it can hardly be heard. This is in contrast to the traditional pastoral elegy, which closes with an apotheosis of the dead loved one, giving hope to the survivor, always offering some kind of consolation in the face of death. Birney simply comments on the passage of time, the closing of a chapter in the life of the survivor. It is a mood of quiet acceptance--not raging in anger, not hopeful for the future, not even remembering the lasting qualities of the lost friend.

My explication of "David" has been but a cursory overview of images and details which I will look back to as I discuss Birney's later mountain poems. Thus the basic elements of the mountain ethos

are: the theme of escape, legs and climbing, mountains as stairs and steps, the bright yet retreating image of the sun, the lake to rest beside, the morning bacon, the snow and the glacier, the upward thrust of the fist of rock or ice or tree, the image of rock as sea, the messages in rock between generations of life, the idea of balance and the images of edges, the images of ripped flesh and the sharp steel blade, the coldness of the moon, and the various aspects of breath and breathing and their relation to silence.

Besides "David", three of the mountain poems are explicitly about mountain climbing: "Conrad Kain", "Climbers", and "Biography". These three poems were all published in 1948-49, though Birney gives the date of composition of "Conrad Kain" as 1942. Thus with "David", first Published in 1941, these mountain poems are from the early part of Birney's career.

"Conrad Kain" (CP I, 114) has not previously been published in any of Birney's many volumes of poetry, and perhaps with good reason. It appeared in the Canadian Alpine Journal in 1951, but the Manitoba Arts Review published it in 1948, set as prose. It is a homage to a real person, and perhaps Birney is inhibited by the biographical element he must therefore retain. At any rate, it seems wooden and awkward in comparison with "David". For instance, these lines are vague and trite:

> Even the mountains had western ways
> And harsh whims to be humoured

And the following lines betray a sticky sentimentality, since the mother's tomb is mentioned for no reason essential to the narrative, the image pattern, or the mood of the poem:

He drifted, after, again to his Austrian valley
and came to the tomb of his mother,
hearing once more the goatbells
clinking over the cosy dale.

The last line is simply poetic laziness.

There is no dramatic tension in the poem, as there is in "David" between David and Bobbie. "Conrad Kain" is a straightforward testimonial, a flabby story from Kain's birth to his death, though the potential for drama in the conquering of Mount Robson is surely there. But it is not enough simply to mention Mount Robson, the Everest of the Canadian Rockies, and expect its majestic name to carry the full force of the poem. Even newspapers report the conquering of the moon; subject matter is not enough to make a poem. Style is more important by far. When Birney describes Robson as "the monster unconquered and murderous, icerobed and stormcrowned", we do not feel the sense of terror and obsession developed in "David" about The Finger, with its talon-like appearance and menacing shadow. There is no sense of frustration and determination in these lines:

Twice he had failed, and climbed
the encircling peaks to reconnoiter again.

Birney cannot seem to internalize the struggles Conrad Kain must have undergone, the same kinds of struggles and joys that the fictional David and Bobbie experience. The simple reporting of direct experience, then, does not make good poetry. The experience must be imaginatively heightened.

Perhaps the poem's insistence on telling about Conrad Kain's diary-writing creates a flatness. Kain has a calculated and reasoned approach to mountain climbing, as his lectures to "worshipful Younglings" and tourists while peacefully puffing his pipe also attest. For instance, as he fumbles "with transit and levels/ in forty degrees below zero", the

problem is reduced to "a debt to a fairy godmotherland/ to be noted down in his diary." David has learned to read weather and rock the same as Conrad Kain (perhaps not quite as well--he fell and Kain didn't), but Birney's account of Kain's mountain savvy lacks energy:

> This upturned realm of nêve and rock and ice
> kept its own weather, had sudden
> winds, thaws, and frosts even swifter,
> to set down in his diary
> ...
> Conrad observed, plotted his tactics

Furthermore, Birney introduces extraneous biographical material which, at the same time as it characterizes Kain as a quiet man, makes facile comments on education, politics, and business:

> Conrad Kain was a simple man
> and never went to college
> to collect the thoughts he should think.
> He failed to run for election
> or retire on the labour of others.

In contrast, we know little about David and Bobbie except in relation to the mountains.

The best parts of the poem are the five stanzas dealing with the actual ascent and descent of Robson, where Birney's imagination is focused on the immediate situation.

In spite of its faults as a dramatic narrative, "Conrad Kain" is interesting because of its contribution to the development of the mountain ethos. The escape theme is there, with Kain escaping from Austria and landlords to the comparative freedom of Canada, and later from the flatness of the prairie to the Rockies:

> His ticket marooned him
> in a second Atlantic of prairie.
> On traplines and lonely farms
> he found how frostbite scalds
> and that flatness and chores are forever.
> Conrad Kain was a mountain man
> and he moseyed off to the Rockies.

His escape, however, is rather easy; the last two lines above deflate the effectiveness of the first four.

Legs are of course mentioned; and sun and brightness as well, though they are not stressed. The lake appears as "the blessed lake" where they camp on the way down Robson. Ice and snow are referred to several times. The glacier, which "hangs high as a hundred Niagaras" in a rather forced hyperbole, has a forehead, but it does not breathe as in "David". Meals are cooked: Kain makes marten soup and boils a billytin. He learns that "the best sleep's above timberline,/ for deeper than cold is the stab of mosquitoes". The mountains are not described as frozen oceans, but they do carry messages: "mountains were seamed with the sagas of men/ back through a thousand centuries". Yet the detail of how they are seamed is not given.

The last part of the poem, which is the most dramatic, gives us the image of balance at the top of Robson, combined with the idea of breathlessness and silence:

> breathless they inched ever upward,
> balanced in glimmering emptiness...
> Then over an overhang glaring with icicled teeth
> they fought through the wild bright air
> to the top.
> There was scarcely time for halloo
> and handshake, a glance through dimming vision,
> at the trespassed terrors below

Again, Birney uses white space within the stanza to indicate the fulcrum moment. The air at the top is wild and bright, and the phrase "dimming vision" indicates some feeling of awe; but to name the feeling at the top of the mountain is not Birney's way in any of the mountain poems. On the way up, the climbers are silent "like cats with ears tensed/ and voices mute, lest a call unseal/ tumult and death", and the moment of silence at the top is balanced by the noise of nervous voices--"jokes

and reproaches and rubbings". This is the same kind of camaraderie that David had been ready to express just before he fell, "with a grin and his lips ready to jest".

Perhaps since the climb is successful, the image of sharp blades is reduced to the wind being "arrowed with ice"; and the flesh is ripped in a single word: "At dawn he led them foot-torn and dazed". Death is not part of the legend, as Birney says: "He is dead now and his conquests faded/ for he failed to carve them from flesh." Yet in his denial is the very image of the torn flesh which is so important to the mountain ethos.

Thus the poem contains all the elements of a mountain poem as prescribed by "David", but they are underplayed in favour of tribute to the wisdom of Kain as teacher and grand old man.

One interesting stanza, however, introduces an idea which does not appear in "David" but which Birney later capitalizes on in "Bushed":

> Soft flakes may fall and fall
> till the lone trapper is prisoned
> and no man comes to his cabin.

These three lines alone almost become a simple, evocative poem. But the terror and mystery of cabin fever are deflated by the matter-of-fact line which follows: "But Kain was a fellow for living." Conrad Kain is always in control; the struggle between man and mountain is pre-arranged in favor of the man. Kain makes an uninteresting subject for a mountain poem. Perhaps failure is more interesting than success.

Perhaps not. "Climbers" (CP I, 143) is an exuberant short poem about weekend climbers who achieve their mountain top only to be forced back into the valley of squealing reality. The escape motif is made explicit in the opening lines:

Above the last squeal of wheels
dead-end of the highest road
lithe climbers escape leaping

The words "last", "dead-end", and "highest" indicate, perhaps, that climbing intensifies life to utter superlatives.

The climbers are young in the use of their legs, like David and Bobbie, and enjoy the chipmunks whirling around them, the "cherry cliffs" and the "muskmelon sky". Birney uses food here as a metaphor rather than a narrative detail, and the images of fruit give a delicious sense of morning. The sense of gaiety and youth is thus clearly established.

The mountain elements are here in concise form: dawn breaking, "beryl lakes", snow and ice. This time the glaciers are peacefully "chewing their cud of rock" --again an animate image which also softens the rock. Waterfalls have become "stentorian icefalls", and their loudness and majesty contrast with the "hushed" and humble attitude of the climbers. The total effect is of the awesomeness of the place.

The third stanza also describes the reality of the climb. The climbers' hands bleed, cut by "the spines of the crest". The balance at the top of the peak uses spare diction to express the moment of breathlessness as a contrast to the packed words of detail and motion in the rest of the poem:

At the end of the thrust
Weak in weak air and a daze of sight
On the pointless point of the peak

Birney uses repetition in a pair of paired words to convey through form the feeling of balance. The two phrases "weak in weak" and "pointless point" are separated by the empty sound and empty image "a daze of sight". The lack of definite images evokes the fatigue of the climb and

the unspeakable wonder of the peak, the attainment of which has no logical point but is nevertheless a goal to be strived for. The life of climbing is emotional, physical, and spiritual, but not intellectual.

The last stanza continues this simple diction. Lack of imagery and lack of concrete diction, however, do not necessarily mean a lapse into the abstract. Birney simply uses bare words to convey the idea that words are irrelevant and cannot express the full force of the meaning and feeling at the peak. These lines convey timelessness, spacelessness, and ultimately peace:

> And this is the beginning of space
> Where there is nothing to say
> and no time

This is an important theme in many of Birney's poems outside the mountain ethos: the idea is expressed in "For George Lamming" (CP II, 91), for instance, that words are "dull servants who say less and worse than we feel". At rare moments of emotional wonder, words are inadequate. The top of the mountain is an emotional as well as a physical high.

The anticlimactic descent is reduced to two final lines, as the poem returns to the squealing cars with which it opened. Birney thus uses the envelope pattern[5] which is a fairly common formal device in his poems. The symmetry created by repeating words or phrases at the beginning and end of a passage or poem gives it a sense of completeness.

Whereas in "David" symmetry was used for ironic purposes, however, in this poem it simply suggests a faint sense of loss or sadness. That Birney includes both the ascent and the descent provides a clue to the nature of the escape to the mountain top: it can never be permanent. Transcendence can occur in moments only. Birney is no mystic. Even in individual poems which portray the moment of wonder, a return to the

everyday world is necessary. The return is not without regret, but acceptance is the keynote. In the whole of his poetry as well, there is this acceptance of duality. For every poem of beauty and tenderness, there is one of sarcasm or outrage. All are part of the human experience.

The poem "Biography" (CP I, 144) shows this switch to a darker mood. The gaiety and peace of "Climbers" are replaced by the climb to death or madness. "Biography" presents the life of an unnamed climber. No fame attends this man's death, unlike the legendary Conrad Kain, who is always in control of himself and the mountain.

This climber is a solitary fellow who tells no stories and gives no advice. There is no explanation for his solitude; he seems to be in some kind of exile, perhaps like the speakers in the Anglo-Saxon poems "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer". The mood and diction of Birney's poem are in fact closely akin to those two Anglo-Saxon poems which he knows so well.

If I may be permitted a short digression, I would like to suggest that Birney sublimates certain features of the Anglo-Saxon elegy in "Biography". Thus, while I am not dealing with Birney's openly Anglo-Saxon poems in this study, it seems to me that this particular mountain poem embodies in a rather subtle way the Anglo-Saxon ethos. In "Biography", then, the mountain ethos and the Anglo-Saxon ethos coincide.

The unexplained solitude and the key imagery of cold and ice are common to "Biography" and "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer". For instance, the stanhleoþu 'stony slopes' in "The Wanderer" are the mountain's stony slopes; and I think the wintres woma 'winter's terror' and the nipe nihtscua 'darkening night-shadow'[6] are reproduced, with all their con-

notations, in Birney's poem. The connection between the poems is further suggested by Birney's use, in the last stanza of "Biography", of the archaic phrase "lancet of rime", which echoes the forgotten words hrimgicelum 'hoar-frost icicles' and hrimcealde 'cold as hoar-frost' from "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer".

The two Anglo-Saxon poems use coldness in nature as a metaphor for the coldness of a man's heart and mind. Without insisting on the literary allusion, for Birney's poems certainly stand on their own, Birney makes the same connection in "Biography", "Bushed", and "Man is a Snow". In "The Wanderer" as the hoar-frost binds the earth, so are the wanderer's mind and heart locked.[7] The following lines from "Man is a Snow" show a similar correspondence between man's heart and the coldness of winter, represented not only by snow but by hoar-frost on the window:

> Man is a snow that cracks
> the trees' red resinous arches
> and winters the cabined heart
> till the chilled nail shrinks in the wall
> and pistols the brittle air
> till frost like ferns of the world that is lost
> unfurls on the darkening window (CP I, 101)

Thus the mountain ethos can symbolize psychological states of mind.

The organization of "Biography" into ten-year time spans and the presence of the nunatak as a sun-dial signal a preoccupation with time passing which is also found in "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer". The unexpected turn in fortune suffered by the climber in "Biography" is also like the change from joy to sorrow suffered by the exiles in the two Anglo-Saxon poems. The marking of time in the snow in Birney's poems suggests the swift and inexorable movement of time; when juxtaposed with the swift movement of the "lancet of rime", the idea emerges of a fate one cannot escape.[8] Thus the mountain in "Biography" is a place of terror and loneliness, clear enough in itself, but enriched by the

poem's subtle correspondences with the Anglo-Saxon elegies.

To return to "Biography" as a mountain poem: after reading the long poems "David" and "Conrad Kain", we see how Birney compresses the mountain ethos in "Biography" without losing any of its sharpness. Understatement is the poem's mode, and the mention of single words or phrases conjures up the whole retinue of imagery and meaning established in the longer mountain poems. In the opening two lines, for instance, all the exuberance of youth and the "joy in lengthening coltish muscles" are expressed in the verbs "plumped and sprung". When Birney describes the lake in this poem, it is not just a place to rest but a place for the young climber to learn all that books can't teach:

> the bright unpredictable book
> gracefully bound in green
> and riffled its pages for rainbow

The cooking of breakfast offers Birney the chance to indulge in alliterative word-play which indicates the youth's joy in life:

> Life was a pup-tent ptarmigan
> chased along simmering slopes
> bannocks and bacon

The ascent above timber-line becomes in this poem a metaphor for the passage into the more rarefied air of adulthood, for Birney superimposes the aging process on the mountain climb:

> By thirty he trudged above timber
> peered over ice at the peaks

In fact, the whole poem is an extended metaphor: a man's life as a mountain climb, ending with death.

The mode of understatement which works so well in this poem can be illustrated, finally, by two single words. The kenning "rockflesh" points to the Anglo-Saxon heritage of some of the poem's imagery and

mood, and it adds to the richness of the mountain ethos. For at the same time as it animates the rock, giving it flesh as the glaciers have veins and the waterfalls have pulses, the word "rockflesh" suggests the idea already established: that a climber's flesh can be ripped to shreds by sharp rocks.

The word "nunatak" might be as ancient a word as "rime", but it has been known in English only since the late nineteenth century. It is an Eskimo word which means "a peak of rock appearing above the surface of inland ice"; the OED mentions a London Times article of 1888 which says: "The 'nunataks'...rise like skeletons above the frozen waste". The context of the word actually makes it unnecessary to look up this unusual word; the simile "like a sundial" establishes the upward thrust of the nunatak, like The Finger, like the serac, like the lone pine--all images of defiance. The word "nunatak" also suggests the Eskimo on the tundra, huddling against the snowstorm, alone against the elements, just as the climber is alone. And by its sound, "nunatak" suggests the terror of the stone and wind attacking the man.

Time is man's adversary, his attacker, and this poem shows how Birney makes this abstract and cliché statement into a forceful and terrifying truth. The short, sharp lines, with two or three strong stresses per line, the lack of narrative comment, and the aggressiveness of the images combine so that the ice-cold rock-hard fist of time hits the reader with a knockout blow.

"Bushed" (CP I, 160) is a mountain poem with the same sense of doom as "Biography". The poem opens with the same rainbow that the climber saw in that poem. In both poems, the rainbow is "invented",

and therefore the lightning which strikes it must be invented, too. As Birney says in "Conference of Heads" (CP I, 76):

> There is no fog but in the will
> the iceberg is elective

Thus in the first line of "Bushed" Birney establishes that the mountain ethos will be used as a metaphor for the trapper's state of mind as well as for the setting of the poem.

The first line also summarizes the action of the whole poem: the shattering of the rainbow world of peace and beauty by the lightning of madness. The lightning, which recalls the "pine spirally scarred by lightning" in "David", is the first of a series of images of sharpness in the poem.

Many details of the mountain ethos are strikingly used in "Bushed". The second stanza has the mountain man resting and cooking food beside a lake. But the meat is porcupine belly, which offers Birney a chance to undercut the domestic peace of the scene. The very presence of porcupine quills, though they are seemingly tamed on a hat band, reinforces the image of sharpness introduced by the lightning.

The dawn is here, as in other mountain poems, and at first it is gay and beautiful as a wood-columbine. But it is also "a fuzzed moth in a flannel of storm". The moth is the image of self-destruction, moving toward the flame of the sun, and the phrase "flannel of storm" offers the paradox of warmth and death that the soft blanket of snow implies.

The breathing glacier is not here, but "the mountain is clearly alive" and begins to send messages of a different kind than the Precambrian trilobites in "David". The mountain begins to assume a primitive aspect, as indicated by the words "valkyrie"[9] and "totems".

The ospreys performing their natural function as hunters give Birney a chance to introduce another piercing image, for their prey is the "cut-throat"--on a mundane level a trout, but evoking the atmosphere of terror through its name.

The moon is here again, performing an action similar to its action in "David". There it "etched the Finger" and here it "carve[s] unknown totems". The sharp slicing of both carving and etching contributes to the images of sharpness in both poems.

Whereas in "David" the animals form a background of known and unknown noises (except for the bird and the goat which foreshadow David's broken body), and in "Climbers" the squirrels whirl among the treetops, in "Bushed" the woods become animals and the animals become threatening. The owls "deride" the man, the woods are described as "beardusky", and the cedar boughs become dangerous moose-horns, another image of sharpness.

When the mountain finally pulls all its forces of terror into the shape of an arrowhead, the metaphor is totally believable on an emotional level, for the lightning, porcupine quills, cut-throats, and moose-horns have prepared for it as solid images of sharpness, and the verbs "whizzing" and "carved"--the action of messages from the mountain and light from the moon--reinforce this. With the image patterns of sharpness in the other mountain poems as well, the arrowhead strikes his heart with all the terror that the mountain can hold.

I have concentrated on the physical images in this poem because it is not clear exactly what the arrow represents to the man's heart and mind. Birney is being his usual reticent self, but wisely so, for to name the terror would be to diffuse its mystery and therefore its power. All the obsession and fear of the mountain peak are embodied in the mountain/arrowhead which pierces this mountain man's heart. Yet when

the "great flint" comes, it is as much a moment of ecstasy as of terror, for it comes "singing".

One important element of the other mountain poems is missing here: the climb itself. Whereas David, the climbers in "Biography" and "Climbers", and even Conrad Kain react to their obsession with the mountains by active attempts to climb and conquer them, this trapped man is unable to muster the nerve or the energy to climb. (The climber in "Biography" had the will, but lost it or forgot it.) This man who is bushed chooses the passive route, but Birney makes no judgment about his choice. In fact he has no choice; the obsession simply overwhelms him. Other men have more strength, perhaps, but they are other men. Birney shows an attitude of acceptance, whatever the man's reaction to the mountain might be. He concentrates on the physical images of the mountain and the various ways a man can interpret them, but he does not judge or explain their reactions. They respond directly to the mountain, without rational thought--except for Conrad Kain. Thus the mountain is beginning to take on the symbolic force of an emotional or perhaps spiritual barrier, and the climbing of it a struggle which may end in despair, success, madness, sacrifice, or simply death.

The elements of mystery, wonder, and awe in "Bushed" are developed for their own sake in "Takkakaw Falls" (CP I, 154). This mountain poem has no human character, but the tone of voice of the poem establishes the poet himself as the mountain man expressing his awe and wonder in a ritual of homage to the waterfalls. Modern man, no less than primitive man, responds to the wonder of nature through the ritual of poetry. The tone of voice in the poem is not "I saw a waterfall and it inspired awe in my soul", but simply and directly "O Waterfall!".

The pre-Christian gods are invoked by the poet: Jupiter, Thor, Woden, and Zeus. And the marvellous Indian word Takkakaw captures the spirit of the falls. This is a mountain poem complete with "upslant ledges" and "taut cliffs", the balance words. The harsh consonants, short lines, and one-syllable words create a mood of action and violence. Birney's craftsmanship is evident throughout the mountain poems, as his words, metre, syllables, and images change in response to the different experiences he is trying to capture.

The mountain here takes on a female aspect--"the brown throbbing thighs of his mountain". And Takkakaw the water is the male, battering the rock. This is an interesting twist on the idea of torn and bruised flesh which appears in the other poems; the waterfalls are ripped and shattered by the rock even as they try to batter it:

> His own gale rends him
> heads off spray-comets
> that hurl from her taut cliff
> <u>shreds</u> even his cataract core (italics mine)

Sexual imagery is obvious in the words of downward hurling and thrusting, in words like "writhing" and "gyring". The mountain experience now becomes integrated with sexual experience.

There is a one-line balance point in the poem, "Out of mist meekly the stream", whereupon the poem changes completely, becoming quiet and slow-moving. Noise is balanced by silence, energy by repose. The natural rhythm of the sexual act governs the poem. Birney uses double words in the first and forceful part of the poem--"falls falls", "rain rainbows", "juggles...struggles", "vaulting the valley", "batters... batters"--to reinforce the rhythm of coupling.

The final lines of quiet peace are equally as necessary to the total rhythm; the slow words are "mewls", "pours", "silt", "coils with

Columbia", "wanders", "climbs...slowly". The completion of the sexual cycle is expressed in the image of birth which occurs right after the balance line of the poem: "Milk-young he mewls in naked green moss".

The rhythms and cycles of nature are allied with the sexual rhythms: the water flows to the river, then to a bigger river, then to the sea, and rises to the clouds by evaporation. Then a storm is born with thunder and rainfall, and the water returns to the river and thunders down the rock as a waterfall. Thus the poem becomes an expression of the life-cycle of water from birth to evaporation into air, and its concrete details express Lu Chi's "mystery of the universe", "four seasons" and "myriad objects".

The poem contains most of the regular mountain images: the escape of the water from the surface of the ocean and again from the clouds; the climbing up by "sunladders"--that is, "steps to the sun's retreat"; the lake or pool where the water rests; the downward motion of the falls; the glacier; the stars of the night which appear in the metaphor "iced-nebulae whirl", which also contains the coldness of ice. Thus in "Takkakaw Falls" Birney explores in detail what he must relegate to two short lines in "David":

> the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden
> cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.

"Daybreak on Lake Opal: High Rockies" (CP II, 172) has the poet-mountaineer responding fully to another experience mentioned in "David" but not expanded upon--the dawn:

> ...while the stars went out, and the quiet heather
> Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom
> Of incredible dawn in the Rockies.

Though "Daybreak" first appeared in the 1973 volume What's So Big About Green?, Birney tells us in Collected Poems that it was first drafted in 1946, along with the other early mountain poems.

"Daybreak" is a shaped poem, a typographical representation of the smallness of light swelling gradually into the final majestic PRESENCE of full light. It works well without being gimmicky, since each line, if uttered separately as the poem's form urges, gains in momentum and force. The final PRESENCE of light is more sharply defined in the 1973 volume than it is in Collected Poems, since the earlier version enhances the shimmering importance of the light by printing PRESENCE in green doubleness with a shadow behind it--as when children write with two pencils at the same time--easy but effective.

The poem is a prayer to the sun, to the dawn which ritually repeats itself every day. The words "ceremony" and "sacrifice" indicate the religious nature of the poem. I use the word "religious" in its widest sense--not to mean "Christian", for Birney's poems are not partisan; but this poem seems to indicate the primitive response of awe which is expressed both in ritual chanting and in poetry.

The mountain ethos is fully realized: the sun, needless to say; the climbing or upward movement of the shape of the poem itself; the "moated" lake which is ruffled "to a green soul" by the light; "the ice-cracked tree-breached walls" which includes the ice and the cliffs. Hands are very important here, but not the man's hands which reach and hold the rocks during the climb. Here, the light has a tactile quality, moving over the landscape and touching the trees, lake, and rock. Its movement is "tremulous", "a ceremony of slow touch without palms", like a priest laying hands on the landscape in benediction. Though the light

touches the land, the sun itself is "untouchable"--the goal which can never be reached by human hands.

Surprisingly, the concept of torn flesh is retained along with the dawn's delicacy of touch. The walls and ramparts are broken in the lines "scarred forever-by-the-wind-besieged ramparts the ice-cracked tree-breached walls." Immediately Birney follows this up with:

> ...the light of
> the untouchable sun sliding from
> skyblue into the chill broken flesh
> of our lifedrop (italics mine)

Whose "lifedrop"? The identification of "our" is left open; it is probably the people who climb the mountains, David and Bobbie and all the other climbers we've met. The word "lifedrop" is one of those super-charged words which Birney uses only at crucial moments. It suggests the blood which is sluggish in the morning and must be warmed by the sun, the fatigue of the climb and the deep sleep in the word "drop". It is also the dripping of time: our lives pass slowly, drop by drop.

The word "sword" recalls all the weapons of steel and the images of sharpness in the mountain poems. Light itself is the sword, the sacrificial instrument wielded by the sun upon the world. Thus every morning, the world is not only warmed and blessed by, but sacrificed to, the sun. There is a doubleness and paradox to Birney's presentation of the dawn which is not at first apparent, but is given in single-word clues which carry the weight of their connotations in other mountain poems. Thus the sun pierces all the cracks and crannies of the world with its sharp and insistent light. The world is simultaneously killed by the light, for each dawn means the world dies a little more, and it lives by the light.

The idea of breath is also important in this poem: the sun has a

"breath without breathing" which creates the image of silence and breathlessness. The wind, like the sun, has two aspects: it scars and besieges the mountain, but it is also a fragrance of heather blowing gently "over unfolding asters and eaglets ruffling the moated lake into a green soul." The contrast between silence and noise is presented, with the sun's warmth "freeing the silence of jay and firtops". The sun is more and more attaining primacy among the complex of mountain images.

Another early mountain poem, "Reverse on the Coast Range" (CP I, 106) expands the images of sharpness and weapons to present an avalanche in terms of a military battle. This is the first poem I have considered which describes the mountain in terms quite alien to the natural environment; the extended conceit is not a form Birney uses often, but like most other forms he at least tries it. The military imagery can be explained, of course, by the 1941 date of the poem, but that is a facile explanation and quite outside the terms of the poem. Yet the conceit is not really forced when we consider the many images of sharpness that have occurred as part of the mountain experience.

To be specific, "Reverse on the Coast Range" describes Alpine fir as "cool and spiked as flint arrowheads". The ripped flesh which always accompanies sharp weapons is expressed in the following: "the larch,/Picked of their yellow flesh by the winter's campaign";[10] the junipers are shredded by the avalanche; and the larches are "uptorn". With the war imagery, blades become guns in a new angle on the theme of destruction by weapons: "gunbarrels", "howitzers", "machinegunned". Bombs explode as the avalanche progresses, in noisy contrast to the silent explosions of spring in the first part of the poem: "explosions of spruce were bursting at last". These forest explosions will be recalled

later in discussion of "The Gray Woods Exploding".

The imagery of rock as ocean is natural enough as the avalanche comes "flooding and fanning" and "drowns [the trees] deep...in implacable rocks and ice". The theme of escape is also here: the dogwoods hear the faraway rumble and flee down the seaslopes to the warmth of the sun and safety.

"Images in Place of Logging" (CP I, 142) is a mountain poem which deals with another destruction of the forest--this time a rape by bulldozers and machines. It could more properly be called a "forest poem", except for the "covert glaciers [which] hunch and withdraw to the bleak arête". The words "glaciers" and "arête" signal the mountain idiom. The contrast of silence and noise is here, and the sharp blades of machines have ripped "the paling hands" of the spruce.

This is a rather bad poem, however, because Birney jostles unrelated and clashing images until the poem becomes confused rather than complex. The poem opens with a cathedral image, moves to brontosaurs, wolves, deer, comptometers, freshets washing, wreaths, revolvers, a party image complete with flags, a children's matchstick game, ants, and a peeled orange world. Perhaps this is what happens when Birney moves too far away from direct experience.

My interest in the poem, however, is in its final three lines:

> ...the men and the metalled
> ants that multiply in the browning
> pulp of the peeled world.

The image of the world being skinned, its flesh ripped by civilized machines, is the nucleus of an idea which becomes one of Birney's lasting concerns: that man has upset the ecological balance of nature. While this chapter has mainly concentrated on man in individual response to

the mountain (except for the last two poems), the next chapter will consider further the effects of man as modern society on the mountain as primitive nature.

The poems considered so far seem to fall into four groups which present a progressively more complex vision of the mountain. "David", "Conrad Kain", and "Climbers" are poems about the actual climbing experience; "Biography" and "Bushed" are poems of passage and change; "Takkakaw Falls" and "Daybreak on Lake Opal" are expressionistic nature poems; and "Reverse on the Coast Range" and "Images in Place of Logging" are poems about destructive forces in nature and in man.

The most literal and straightforward poem is "Conrad Kain"; it is almost a simple reporting of direct experience, with little imaginative heightening. "Climbers" is also a simple poem, though it is not simplistic,[11] for it compresses the mountain ethos established in "Conrad Kain" and "David". It presents the basic mountain experience: the joy of the climb, with a memorable expression of the feeling of emptiness and elation which is the raison d'être for climbing; the images of sun, lake, and food; the escape from civilization; the camaraderie of youth; and the physical pain of the climb. "David" presents all these and more; it is the only poem in this chapter which deals with friendship between men as much as with their experience of the mountain. The nature poems "Takkakaw Falls" and "Daybreak" present the poet-climber's emotional reaction to the waterfall and the dawn, which are noted in "David" but not dwelled upon. Thus each mountain poem seems to explore in depth a specific aspect of the mountain ethos established in "David".

"Takkakaw" and "Daybreak" single out water and sun, which thus rise in importance in the hierarchy of mountain images presented in

"David". "Takkakaw" links man with nature by identifying the natural cycle of water with the sexual cycle of man. "Daybreak" presents the sun as the foremost mountain image, the goal at the peak, source of all light and warmth and therefore to be worshipped. But the daily ritual of light breaking over the mountains also signifies the inevitable passing of time.

"Biography" and "Bushed" are also very much concerned with the passage of time--as is "David", for that matter. The mountain climb becomes a metaphor for the progression in a man's life from birth to death, from joy and hope to terror and madness.[12] The last two poems in this chapter are expressive of certain destructive forces both in man and nature, and they show Birney experimenting with the extended conceit and with imagery superimposed on the mountain ethos.

These early mountain poems already display a wide range and complexity. Above all, they show that an individual man's experience of the mountain can be seen as emblematic of his emotional, spiritual, physical, and sometimes intellectual response to his world. The mountain ethos thus becomes a way to explore the complexities of man as an individual, but without moving out of the realm of direct experience and into abstractions, without preaching or philosophizing. Birney gains poetic distance from his thematic concerns by remaining as close as possible to the experiential world of the mountain.

CHAPTER V

TECHNOCRACY AND WILDERNESS

> Not to have known--as most men have not--either the mountain or the desert is not to have known one's self. Not to have known one's self is to have known no one, and to have known no one makes it relatively easy to suppose, as sociology commonly does, that the central problems are the problems of technology and politics....
>
> No man in the middle of a desert or on top of a mountain ever fell victim to the delusion that he himself was nothing except the product of social forces, that all he needed was a proper orientation in his economic group, or that production per man hour was a true index of happiness.[1]

The mountain poems in this chapter deal mainly with modern man as a product of various social and historical forces, coming to the mountain trailing clouds of civilization. Thus in these poems Birney often presents an inversion of the mountain ethos as a means of direct and indirect social irony.

"What's So Big About Green?" (CP I, 148) is a mountain poem complete with climbers, peaks, lakes, glaciers, the sun, messages on rock, ripped flesh, silence and noise. But it is much more than that. The human beings are out to conquer the mountains, all right, but not with their bare hands and vulnerable feet, not with love and respect for the wilderness. The climbers here don't rest by the lake, sing hymns to the dawn and the waterfalls, cook over an open campfire, and finally balance at the mountain top just for the glorious, breathless feeling and the closest approach to the unapproachable wonder of the sun. They have none of the attitudes of enjoyment, challenge, awe, or even terror that we have encountered in other mountain poems. Instead, the men in this poem blast the rock, destroy the trees, and pollute the

lakes, remaining themselves invulnerable to the power and beauty of the mountain.

Birney introduces wider contexts in this poem which create ironies when seen against previous mountain poems. He expands on the unnamed activities of the work camp which David and Bobbie escape from, showing the effect of industrial civilization on the mountain wilderness. Taking a historical approach, Birney catalogues the activities of the white man which have upset the balance of nature.

The first trappers build a fort, cut down the pines, trap the animals, and shoot the Indians. They remain vulnerable, though:

> But rain & new bush
> dissolved the fort
> The Lake almost won

The retreat of man is temporary, however. He comes again for gold, cuts down the trees, and after another lapse brings in the railroad.

Some of the most powerful lines in the poem recall the "browning pulp of the peeled world" from "Images in Place of Logging":

> A railway really gets
> a wilderness by the throat
> sends fingers in
> to rub the green skin off
> This one just tickled the Lake
> but it scratched up a fine carcinoma
> only two hours away
> our grandfathers named Vancouver.

The vulnerable hands of the climbers are an ironic memory as fingers themselves become weapons, sharp and scratching, cruel and groping. Later in the poem we see another image of flesh no longer whole and healthy:

> So what's so big about green?
> It's made to rot
> like flesh. Green : gangrene

Though the skin of the earth is being torn, man's own flesh is rotting too.

The complex attitude towards hands as strangling and destructive yet vulnerable themselves to destruction and capable of healing and tenderness is explored in the earlier poem "Hands" (CP I, 67).

The narrator of "Hands" paddles his canoe and sees the trees around him as hands, at the same time remembering visions of hands in battle and in the civilized world. The images of the poem reverberate with the images in many of the mountain poems. The trees arch their palms, almost in benediction, "juggling the shimmer of ripples", and we remember the tenderness of dawn touching the earth. The fingers of the trees are lithe, but they are in the next moment "gaunt as a Jew's in Poland"--an image of starvation caused by cruelty. The narrator transforms the cedar's drooping boughs into "webbed claws", and we recall the man in "Bushed" who saw them as moose-horns.

Memory and observation, past and present, history and personal experience intertwine in the canoeist's mind. He thinks of the healing hands of the surgeon, and then of the hands which held the bayonet; the soldier who clutches the parachute cord to save his life, yet takes the life of another by clutching the uniformed throat. The hands on the typewriter keys clutch the "self-filling patriot pen" but are also capable of "clasping warmly over the bomber contract". And the same hands which knit socks for the boys overseas can point fingers in witch hunts. Thus Birney illustrates the duality of man's nature through a series of contrasting pairs of concrete images.

To return to "What's So Big About Green?", we note the reappearance of Lake Opal. It is no longer shimmering in the dawn, however; the poet notes that the name "Opal" is now inappropriate:

'Sulphur' 'd be better
for the springs on the nearshore
still fuming & yellowing up

Lake Opal is polluted, its waters stagnant since the lake has been dammed. A resort town has been built beside it, a debased image of the peaceful and innocent rest which the climbers found beside a jewel lake:

We straddled the old pool with a highriser
the Place of Healing Chalet
complete with saunas/bars/
resident European psychiatrists
& a heliport on the roof

The ascent is easy now: helicopter flights accomplish it hourly.

It has become impossible to gaze with longing or even with obsession at the peaks in the distance:

You can't see ridges anymore
now that We've got the local overcast
merged with the Continental permacloud

The implication here, as throughout the poem, is that men have lost their ideals and their vision of the natural life along with their vision of the mountain peaks.

The "Continental Permacloud" is a cloud of disease which is part of a cluster of disease images in the poem. The disease is a moral decay which cannot be healed by psychiatrists or healing waters. Yet the images of decay and rotting in the physical world of nature have the positive connotation that good old 'Life' is at it again.

The mountain peaks are still there, however:

How do we know? Because the geiger boys
climb up to check the waterfalls
Man they're hotter now than those old springs
but not with sulphur!

The workaday world has thus ascended the mountain, and there is no longer any escape to the tranquillity of wind and water and mountain top.

But the Sun definitely retains its place of permanence. It is still untouchable, the same sun which David and Bobbie reached for, the same sun worshipped in "Daybreak". In the brief and silent lapse between gold fever and railway building, the Sun is the unattainable eternal ideal:

> It's our raging Sun
> that swims in the real peace
> seething away with the Others
> unheard and unhearable

The "Others" are not explicitly defined by Birney the unphilosophic, but since Birney capitalizes "We" and "Us", it seems clear that the "Others" are those who are not men--that is, those who are part of the natural world. For in this poem, man the technocrat has separated himself from the natural wilderness.

Near the end of the poem Birney reinforces the supremacy of the Sun:

> Bare lava's best
> and cousin to the Sun
> That's where Life is genuine Life
> fire and atoms being born
> What's happened here on earth
> is only science fiction
> a nightmare soonest over
> Somebody had to get us back
> in step with all the planets

Birney uses a particularly pessimistic voice in this poem, a voice that criticizes rather than accepts. This is the mountain poem as social comment.

This poem explicates a master-servant relationship between the earth and man. Sometimes man wins, sometimes the earth; just as in other mountain poems sometimes the climber wins, sometimes the mountain. Before the white man, there is a balance in nature, a truce:

> A few millenia of truce
> between leaf, elk & wolf
> Waterflies, fish & the osprey
> a saw-off between berries and birds

There is balance, too, in the dialectic between animate life and inanimate rock, between hydrocarbons and lava:

> The stubborn grass
> Crept with mice
> 'Life' was at it again
>
> Our good old lava
> made a last try to stop it
> boiling up a rash of volcanoes
> Still those hydrocarbons
> came sloshing back

The coming of the white man produces a tension between man and nature chronicled in stanzas 10 to 14. But eventually the delicate balance is tipped in favour of man, and nature loses out. Ironically, however, man will necessarily lose as well when nature is destroyed, for he is originally part of nature himself.

The poem ends on a rather facile and sentimental note. Birney has many poems of propaganda, social comment, and satire which are not part of this study. Propaganda in poetry upsets the balanced view of the world. If the reader is forced into one direction of belief by a heavy-handed poet, the poem stands to lose in delicacy and complexity of expression, though the outrage it expresses may be necessary and true. Yet propaganda is not to be deplored: it is a warning which has at its heart a love and respect for the harmony of man and nature.

Another "poem with a message" I will mention only briefly: "Man on a Tractor" (CP I, 96). It too has its mountain elements, though its main focus is on the differences--the dialectic if you will--between the working classes and the elite. Thus the mountain ethos is used as idiom in the wider context of sociological concerns.

The mountains in this poem are definitely a place of escape, a retreat from the harsh realities of working life. The man on the tractor

is trapped on the prairie, "unrolling the earth's flesh" with his plow. The prairie itself is an escape from the war in Europe, and he knows he should feel lucky. But he daydreams of the mountains, through which he and his brother rode the rails years earlier:

> into the fountaining woods and the mountains
> They had watched the alive lakes unreel
> and the flying rivers milked
> with the grist of glaciers
> inching down from the dazzling peaks

The peaks are unattainable, for he and his brother have no leisure to climb them, and they envy

> The tourists moving among the spruce
> the peacock Americans riding through resinous woods
> the glistening girls in canoes on cool lakes
> For their faces were dustless and blank with ignorance
> of tractors or kicks in the rump or three-day hungers...
> the sleek and their children paddle the glittering rivers
> and fish by the friendly fir through a summer's glory

The mountain, land of cool dreams and leisure, will work its revenge on the elite, however: the last line puts them "under the poised avalanche". Whatever sociological meaning this avalanche has, and even if it is only a hope, it implies that the mountain of ideals must be actively climbed, or it will have its revenge on those who are content simply to float in ease on the rivers and lakes, oblivious of the peaks.

The exploitation of both the mountain and the workers is considered in the poem "Pachucan Miners" (CP II, 16). The elements of the mountain idiom are quite complete in this poem, but Birney inverts them for ironic effect. This is basically an escape poem, though the escape is not away from the valley and from work and up to the mountain top, but the reverse. The "cold peak's argent mysteries" inspire not an aesthetic or spiritual longing but a lust for money. The mountain exists to be exploited, not confronted, nor worshipped, nor experienced. Ironically,

only the silver ore manages to escape upward:

> ...only the ore has risen
> into the tasselled wind and run
> on singing rails beneath the ardent
> sky to sorceries beyond their vision

The word "ardent" is singled out by its near-rhyme with "argent"; thus without stating it directly, Birney calls attention to the ardent wish for escape which the miners must feel.

Birney uses several words of ritual significance, even religious in the broadest sense of the word, to signify the buried longings of the miners. The search for ore has begun with "precortesian priests"; they are searching for the "mysteries" of the mountain and the "sorceries" of silver. The mountain is "the white Olympus of the gringos", the place where their god of money dwells. In the last stanza, the modern Eurydice has a "crucifix agleam above the sheet" while she wears the pagan "snakes Toltecan looping in her ears". I don't think Birney is ridiculing or moralizing here; he is simply pointing out the paradox in a tone of acceptance, and juxtaposing time past with time present. If there is any ridicule, it is of the gringos who exploit the miners, but Birney is careful in this poem not to spout anti-capitalist propaganda.

Details from the mountain ethos are revealed as the miners tramp down the mountain road; but when they dance:

> backs fling upright O now legs are male
> are braced each knotty pair to hold
> up song and hurl it at the night

The singing and dancing are the only means of escape and freedom for the miners. The brightness of tequila and the artificial lights are a necessary substitute for the sun which is missing from the miners' lives. They spend all day in the darkness, and when they emerge it is only to the faded light of "thin stars".

The imagery of brightness is relatively as pervasive in this short poem as in the longer poem "David": the "nugget sun", the "thin stars", "white-eyed miners", "white Olympus", "doors of light", "tequila is a brightness", "bottles and faces gleam", "crucifix agleam", "torchy den". The miners need light and can get it only in a barroom. The implication is that human beings need light for spiritual and emotional renewal, but in this poem the life-giving sun has made almost a complete retreat.

The ice, snow, and glaciers of the mountain ethos are compressed into the "cold peak" of the mountain and the shivering of the peons selling roasted maize to the miners. The maize itself is the break for nourishment that appears in many of the mountain poems. On their way down, the miners pass the "blackened walls above/the tree-abandoned valley", and we recall the opposite movement of other climbers above the treeline and between narrow walls.

There is usually in the mountain poems a pause, a balance at the peak, where Birney uses spare words to express ultimates. Since this poem presents a downward movement, the pause is at the ultimate descent:

> at the lowest street the doors of light till
> peal out tequila is a brightness (italics mine)

Again Birney uses white space between stanzas in a functional way, to represent the doors opening. At this point, too, the contrast between noise and silence is made explicit. The miners have tramped "wordless" and the "tree-abandoned valley" sounds still and quiet, when the doors open suddenly to both light and noise. In this poem, the noise is creative while the silence is dull and heavy, in contrast to a poem such as "Climbers". Thus the natural rhythms of men's lives are tragically reversed in this poem.

The up and down movements in the poem are stressed: the dark search for ore is "deepened"; the "ore has risen"; the miners are "helmeted as divers" and then "pressed upwards", presumably by the elevator. In the first line of the second stanza the miners are balanced between the upward ("under thin stars") and the downward ("by murky troughs"). They "tramp down" and "descend past blackened valleys" to "the lowest street", and the upward movement returns: "backs fling upright" and "each knotty pair" of legs is set "to hold up song and hurl it at the night". The image is of defiant upward movement, like the fist and the Finger and the upthrust tree in "David". The aggressive movement expresses both the frustration and energy of the miners. The final movement is "down to where deep in her torchy den... Eurydice reclines" (italics mine). The downward movement to Hades is implied by Birney's use of the classical allusion, for the workers are indeed living a hell on earth.

In "Machu Picchu" (CP II, 73) Birney chronicles another encounter between white and native civilization, between modern and ancient civilization. The lust for gold led Pizarro and his men to murder the Incan priests who would not reveal its whereabouts and the whereabouts of their holy city. Now Birney presents four modern tourists who climb to the ruins of the holy temple and find not gold but something more precious. Somehow, through the climb, the narrator of the poem comes to experience some of the now-rare feeling of holiness in the mountain temple which the Incas built to worship the sun. Birney's account of the real experience of the climb to the top of Machu Picchu allows him to speculate on history, geology, spirituality, and modern civilization.

The poem opens with a statement about stubbornness which turns out to be a statement of the futility of human civilization trying to make itself eternal against the inevitable movements of the earth in geologic time. The first stanza and the last two stanzas must be read together. Though the ruins of Machu Picchu defiantly persist, seemingly withstanding the forces of nature, this is its eventual fate:

> By grain clod stone
> the architrave crumbles and the hill
> The corn terrace sifts to the Urubamba
> to the Amazon joins the attrition
> of continents perishing into the sea
>
> Stripped tomb and town of triumph
> sooner or later you will finish dying
> like all of us

This is the elegiac mode, with the poet standing on the ruins of a past civilization, seeing and holding the artifacts and musing on the passage of time. To be more specific, it is in the Anglo-Saxon elegy tradition.[2]

The following lines from "Machu Picchu" echo the same sense of admiration for the Incan master-builders which an unknown Anglo-Saxon elegist[3] had expressed:

> Linking roofless palace shop
> and the precisioned cyclopean stone
> of hut temple storehouse tower
> there are 3000 hand-hewn steps
> ...this miraculous exactitude of Incan stone

When Birney's tourist cannot handle the Incan artifacts, for even they have "gone down to museums", he can still echo the "ubi sunt" refrain which is originally from the classical Latin tradition. He can still say, like The Wanderer,[4] where have they gone?

> What human leavings there were
> necklaces the bones of old women
> and children are gone down to museums

Did the men all leave for the war
Pizarro had already won?
And the handmaidens of the Sun?
On three sides the cliffs
continue to fall to the Urubamba

Birney has no direct answer to his rhetorical questions, but the last two lines quoted form a restrained but nonetheless profound expression of "Alas!" When he tells of the sacrifice of the Virgins of the Sun, his diction is spare and quiet:

The Virgins of the Sun
and whatever strong town
at last embraced them
vanished out of belief

This last line has a double meaning: the Virgins were sacrificed because of their tribe's beliefs, but they have also vanished so completely that it is hard for modern tourists to believe they existed.

The poem also becomes a lament for modern man's loss of beliefs, his lack of any kind of spiritual faith. The following lines illustrate the characteristic modern attitude of cynicism, while also suggesting that the building of modern churches represents a perversion of the purity of spiritual belief:

For it was too high and too far here
under the equatorial snows to pervert
this miraculous exactitude of Incan stone
into basements for still another
San Juan de Something of peasant styes
supporting a surplus of uglified churches
in Christ's makeshift Peru

The suggestion that Incan temple-building is somehow more pure than modern temple-building is an oversimplified criticism of organized religion. I think Birney is indulging here in nostalgia for a golden age, a more primitive age of belief. Yet in his very denial that spirituality can be housed in modern churches, he is embodying the scepticism which haunts modern man.

There is also the implication in the lines just quoted that the only purity is to be found on the mountain top, above all perversions of civilization, modern or ancient. The mountain itself is thus the symbol of spiritual value, and "Machu Picchu" as a whole is the clearest expression in Birney's mountain poems of the spiritual significance of the mountain.

"Machu Picchu" still retains many elements of the mountain ethos. The second stanza, for instance, has ironic undertones when we recall the innocent breakfast which David and Bobbie share:

> ...Past
> The inlet we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned
> On a poplar prong, in the hurrying slant of the sunset.

Birney repeats the word "grilled" in "Machu Picchu", and I feel it is a significant repetition:

> ...the lords of the Inca grilling
> in Cuzco on the spit of Pizarro

Birney is not above juxtaposing the mundane act of eating with the holy act of sacrifice and the unholy act of murder. "Grilling...on the spit" is definitely a breakfast image, grotesque and discomfiting as it sounds. Seen in the light of Birney's musings about stubbornness and futility in the opening stanza, the ignominious image of meat on a spit seems a fitting image of the futility of the Inca lords' sacrifice. The Holy City could not be protected; it is now in ruins. The editorial comment about "early Britons or late Canadians" may seem to be a vacuous interjection, but the introduction of present time, and its affinities with all eras of time, is an important dimension of the poem.

The sharp blades of the mountain ethos appear as machetes (not specifically named) and "fers de lance". Later in the poem, the sharp

instruments of the Inca priests operating on skulls are referred to:

> Brain and blood gone forever
> skulldented trepanned

and the rock-hard skulls are as vulnerable as men's hands and feet. The mountains themselves are even called "swords of the Andes".

The jungle which the geologist slashes through is also a jungle of ignorance. He has had to fight through the natives' "fers de lance", and by pairing "ignorance" with "fers de lance" in one line and one syntactic phrase, Birney implies that ignorance is a vicious weapon. Thus he uses understatement in his best poems, and refrains from long dissertations.

When the poem introduces the four climbers, the sense of vertigo is palpable:

> Crawling over them yesterday
> to peer with cold bellies
> down all three cliffs falling still
> through a mile of air and lianas
> to the snaking Urubamba

The "3000 hand-hewn steps" and "great terraces rising to the clouds" have their echoes of Anglo-Saxon master-builders, but they are also a refinement of the "Stairs from the valley and steps to the sun's retreats" in "David". The Incas have used their bare hands to fashion the rock into steps, as the adjective "hand-hewn" indicates. And the tourists are also climbing the mountain with their bare hands: they "groped up stairs grooved and gouged in the living rock". While Birney doesn't refer directly to torn hands in this line, the verbs "groped", "grooved", and "gouged" indicate that both Inca and tourist have made direct contact with the rock: there are no helicopters to Machu Picchu.

Birney uses references to feet and breath in two of his four portraits of the climbers:

the doctor was short of breath
the professor's feet were flat

Instead of ordinary descriptions we get these comic details straight from the mountain litany.

The theme of lost splendour is evinced in the conversation of the four tourists. Right after the "ubi sunt" lament and the quietness of the mute cliffs, the four puny voices of the tourists are heard. Instead of the dignified and impassioned debate of warriors or priests, Machu Picchu now hears this debate:

the speeds of various colour films
the length a vicuña spits
the statistics of malnutrition
and the figures of girls in Lima

The tourists are "acolytes" who can never hope to approach the holiness of Inca priests, living as they do in a time when worship is no longer considered necessary. But they long for holiness nevertheless. Why else would they risk their lives and strain their muscles to climb the mountain?

We now come to the heart of the poem, for their glib talk has merely been a transparent effort to hide their true feelings of awe; they make noise to cover up the silence.[5]

But the truth is our talk was mainly
to hide how we felt growing suddenly
bodily back into the legend
no conquistador hooked even
his mailed finger into.

The adverbs "suddenly" and "bodily" express the immediacy of the experience. No matter what their backgrounds or modern deficiencies, these four men are experiencing Machu Picchu directly and profoundly. Thus Birney illustrates in this poem the revitalizing power of direct experience. In Birney's poem, climbing the mountain is symbolic of the

tourists' search for moral and spiritual values which are missing from their lives back home, down below--even though curiosity might be their only admitted motive.

The next stanza is the fulcrum of the poem, the statement of peak excitement which is found in most mountain poems. Because Machu Picchu is in fact a temple to the sun, Birney can freely express feelings and thoughts of a religious nature about the mountain and the sun, the foremost mountain image, for they are appropriate to the immediate experience.

> Today in fact stirred
> by quite nameless excitement
> We have waked in the last dark hour
> groped up stairs grooved and gouged
> in the living rock to stand
> higher than the highest watchtower
> like Brocken spectres magnified
> on the black peak and see the Sun
> rise still on what was built
> to worship Him

Birney uses the spare diction of ultimates and superlatives: "We have waked in the last dark hour...to stand higher than the highest watchtower...". There is no outpouring here of fervent emotion or mystical vagueness; instead the narrator is so moved by the moment that he wisely admits that words are inadequate to describe the feeling. He is simply "stirred by quite nameless excitement". The moment occurs at dawn, and I am reminded particularly of the feelings of awe and holiness Birney expresses in "Daybreak: Lake Opal".

The phrase "Brain and blood gone forever" in the next stanza refers of course to the human sacrifices in Incan times, and to the fact that even the priests are gone; but it also suggests the feeling of the climbers as they stand on the peak, totally drained of reason (brain), totally empty of emotion (blood). Machu Picchu is empty of man and even of "writhing vine" as the stanza ends with a final "ubi sunt" list of

what is gone. In the next stanza the tourists descend as quickly as their aching limbs will allow.

The poem ends with three stanzas of musing. The first shows the greenness of the forest which is lively and "undiscouraged" as it resumes its supremacy over the machete, as in "What's So Big About Green?" The second is the previously quoted statement about geologic attrition in the face of time.[6]

The final stanza represents a rare direct expression of Birney's conclusions about the "good" and the "beautiful" which are found on the mountain top. Carried away by the awe he is trying to express, Birney now succumbs to abstract and generalized diction:

> Till then
> it is good and beautiful to see you stare
> out of your green humped cumulus
> of mountains and the human mist you
> and Hiram Bingham and the high Incas
> obstinately into your Sun

Abandoning his usual mode of understatement, Birney here becomes rather pompous and dogmatic. His narrative details with their symbolic implications would have been enough to suggest what he unwisely states directly in these lines. Until the last stanza, then, "Machu Picchu" illustrates the efficacy of direct experience. Birney unfortunately robs the reader of his own conclusions about the poem by explaining the final meaning of a profound mountain experience in words which, alas, try too hard to be profound. He has thus marred an otherwise fine poem.

No such problems of overstatement lessen the poetic force of "The Mammoth Corridors" (CP II, 61), another poem of elegy, sacrifice, and modern man's loss of beliefs. Birney achieves aesthetic distance by using the two-voice technique he has developed in such earlier poems as

"Tea at My Shetland Aunt's", "Prairie Counterpoint", "Six-Sided Square: Actopan", and "Sinaloa". It is a technique based on balance, and the two voices create dramatic tension and irony.

The two voices in "The Mammoth Corridors" are that of a car driver following the Trans-Canada Highway through the Rockies from Vancouver eastward, and the voice of a tourist guidebook following the same route. The italicized excerpts from the travel guide speak for themselves and do not need to be mocked; thus Birney escapes the propagandistic tone of "What's So Big About Green?" and the pontificating tone of the last stanza of "Machu Picchu".

The false idealism and gung-ho enthusiasm for progress--the voice of the travel guide--sound tinny beside the car driver's unobtrusive tone of realism. The self-awareness which the car-driver's voice reveals--without diatribe, without whining--speaks more eloquently of the guilt of man in destroying the ecological balance than the alternating snideness and sentimentality of the speaker in "What's So Big About Green?":

> I can't help feeling sort of proud
> it's We who've done it
> ...& finished the Original Plan
> before 1984
>
> What's more We did it without help
> from even one good earthquake
> or a new volcano
> & without using a single bomb
> --just Ourselves
> and
> Our kids

While the speaker here uses the pronoun "We", thus implicating himself, a personal sense of loss and guilt is far more apparent in the following lines from "The Mammoth Corridors", where the speaker identifies himself as a real human being complete with foibles and ancestors:

but from the truths that compel me
up the land's one nerve like a virus
to undo in a single day my father's lifetime
of westering
from my own lusts and neckties and novels
from ulcers vitamins bulletins accidia
i lie unshielded under each motel's roof

Turning to the mountain elements of the poem, we see that some are transformed, while some retain their eternal character. Mountains and glaciers change much more slowly than men; what has changed is the climber. David and Bobbie and the earlier climbers used their feet and hands, but this mountain traveller drives "over the smooth Trans-Canada Hiway." Though the guidebook-voice is smug in its corporate belief that the four-lane highway makes the journey effortless and thus better, the car-driver realizes the loss he suffers by driving instead of climbing. The lines quoted above attest to this, and when he calls his car "the master I own", reversing the accepted and obvious relationship between man and machine, he further emphasizes his awareness of loss.

The speaker (that is, the real human being, not the guide-book-voice) in "The Mammoth Corridors" knows that the car has robbed him of a real encounter with the mountains, and he cannot truly experience

...the unsupportable Real
the tortured peaks
only a breath more broken
the blind dive of the canyons
a scratch of a century deeper
since those first compulsive whites
...came hurtling in improbable canoes

If Birney's poetic ethic is experience as paramount, perhaps it is a moral imperative as well. Much of the malaise that affects modern man can thus be attributed to this very distance from the immediate and real experience in which mind, body, and heart must all be involved.

The escape into the mountains is still partially effective, however. The traveller is trying to escape Vancouver's "sullen leisured dogs", "the rolling realtors", and "the spastic traffic of buyers and bought". The last phrase is another inversion of the master-servant relationship, and shows Birney subtly commenting that the modern city-dweller who has accepted the consumer ethic, created by advertising, has been trapped by his pursuit of goods.

The traveller in the car is trying to escape Vancouver, trying to find a more direct and real experience of the world. Because he is still a sensitive man, he recognizes and responds emotionally to

> the uncontrollable cliffs and the starlight
> falling on the same ice-bitten ranges
> the first men saw

The mountains have lost none of their power and dignity. Down from the mountains, though, he returns to the civilization of Calgary on the prairie:

> An ash of ice whines at the cross of streets
> A morning drunk is spattering curses
> over a halfbreed girl in a blotched doorway

He escapes again, this time not to mountains but to ice, to the northern glacier which is still part of the mountain ethos established in earlier poems. The glacier has a female aspect: she is a mammoth cow whose breath is "the unstillable winds". She is in constant dialectic battle with the sun, in an eloquent expression of Birney's master-servant theme:

> mother of ice
> who embraced it all
> a wink ago in the world's eye
> till the sun won us again
> with his roving glance
> and sent her shrinking and weeping
> frozen lakes over the upstart grass

This is one of Birney's best stanzas, showing a powerful mastery of metaphor and language. The glacier embraces the earth, and the earth winks at the sun with a come-hither look. The sun responds with a roving glance, winning back the earth to his power. While the sun and the glacier vie for power, the earth is the servant of both. The line "a wink ago in the world's eye" juxtaposes the moment with eternity, making geologic forces which man cannot even perceive happen with the same rapidity as a flirtation between a man and a woman.[7]

The portrayal of geologic time as a mere instant is also seen in these lines:

> the tortured peaks
> only a breath more broken
> the blind dive of the canyons
> a scratch of a century deeper

In the three words "wink", "breath", and "scratch", personification of the landscape achieves this identification of personal time with geologic time. The word "scratch" also conjures up the previously stated idea that the world itself has a vulnerable skin which may be torn. In this poem, the one who scratches the earth's skin to form canyons is time itself. All three lines--"a wink ago in the world's eye", "only a breath more broken", and "a scratch of a century deeper"--are succinct and poignant expressions of the transitory nature of all things on earth, even the mountain and the glacier.

Man is thus totally vulnerable to the forces of time. At the same time as the speaker chronicles in this poem the destruction of prehistoric man and the decaying of modern man, he realizes his own loss of personal roots. Modern man seems puny in "The Mammoth Corridors", but prehistoric man, who dealt directly with the mountains and the glacier, assumes an admirable stature as combatant even though he is finally des-

troyed by their forces. Nevertheless, it is no shame to be sacrificed to the mountain, as "David" proves; the shame is in not confronting the mountain.

The central part of the poem, which deals with the movement of the Siberians, is full of details of the mountain ethos. It is not mere sight of the mountains which drives the Siberians to climb them as an escape from a routine everyday life; their motive is survival, an escape from death. The speaker, again showing his awareness of modern man's loss, knows that they possessed the mountains, "which I inheriting do not possess". The black rivers rattle "from the glare of the narrowing icewalls" as the Siberians are forced up a chimney of ice, the same kind of chimney that David and Bobbie climbed, as they "fought the rock and shouldered and kneed/ our way for an hour and made it".

The blood on the ice is another unforgettable image of torn flesh; but it is the blood of the wooly mammoths, not the blood of the Siberian climbers:

> till the last red fountains
> (Mammuthus parelephas columbi his blood)
> gushed on the boggy tundra
> at the blind corridor's end

Birney can always manipulate specific words and phrases to suggest by a change in diction far more than is stated. In these lines he lapses into Latin, giving the generic name of the wooly mammoth. But by including the phrase "his blood" within parentheses, he suggests that he is not merely trying to gain zoological accuracy, to reproduce the lettered card under the mounted specimen "in the nearby museum". To me, the Latin suggests the mystery of the rite of sacrifice. The Siberians are the priests, and the wooly mammoths are enormous sacrificial animals. It is the juxtaposition of the simple phrase "his blood" with

the formal Latin phrase which evokes a sense of ceremony and religious sacrifice in this natural evolution of life in prehistoric times.

This connotation is strengthened in the next stanza, where the Siberians survive to become native Indians (an interesting speculation by Birney about prehistory) and continue their role as priests or worshipers enacting rituals in response to nature:

> They moved by day through bear and elk
> and by their killing
> outliving sleep by capturing the deer's Wit
> the Power of cougar
> in nets of dance and Word
> the medicine of mask
> the threat of drum

Birney uses two specific words to suggest another sort of sacrifice in the modern world:

> A morning drunk is spattering curses
> over a halfbreed girl in a blotched doorway

The words "spattering" and "blotched" suggest blood, and the implication is that the drunk and the halfbreed girl are two unfortunate victims of modern society. Their sacrifice becomes ironic in contrast to the majestic sacrifice of the mammoths, and the holy ritual is debased to an unholy curse.

The passage which describes the death of the mammoths also presents a birth image: the Siberians in struggling for survival are "floundering in the newborn earth". When the speaker describes his search for his personal beginnings,[8] he presents the image of his own birth:

> Where all began for me
> though the log cabin where first i was forced
> into air
> is a lost ghost under a vanished bridge
> by a dying river

The forcing of the child through the narrow birth canal to his first breath is allied with the forcing of the mammoths through the "narrowing

icewalls" to their death "at the blind corridor's end", where they breathe their last breath. This poem is about ultimates: birth and death, the finality of life, the harshness of time. It is an elegy uttered by a modern man painfully aware of his personal losses and how they are mirrored in the rhythms of the earth. Time masters everything, even things which seem massive and eternal. It is no surprise that his log cabin has disappeared, yet his sense of anguish at its disappearance is nonetheless painful.

The speaker does not make his pain known directly. Like The Wanderer, he seems to feel that he must keep his heart locked and bound, constricted in "narrow icewalls". Thus his anguish is understated, uttered in bare and unexpressive words which give a sense of finality, of time inexorably passing. The log cabin is a "lost ghost under a vanished bridge/ by a dying river". The simple words speak death with the same eloquence as Milton's

> O the heavy change, now thou art gone
> Now thou art gone, and never must return[9]

Birney uses similar bare words elsewhere in the poem: "the lonely park", "the uncontrollable cliffs", "past the point of no return", "the unstillable winds", "the rounded silence", and the poem finally ends with "a long hard peace". Yet his diction in the poem is more commonly energetic and metaphorically expressive: "spastic traffic", "beads and syphilis", "orgasms of power", "ice-bitten ranges", "madcap virgin", "monstrous rutting". The contrast of noise and energy with finality and silence which is illustrated by these two groups of words is also a feature of the other mountain poems, which balance silence at the mountain peak with shrieking in the valley. This conscious manipulation of diction is one of Birney's strengths as a poet.

"The Mammoth Corridors" is a complex poem which intertwines many kinds of diction and, like "Machu Picchu", many eras of time--cosmic, geologic, prehistoric, historic, and personal. Its images reverberate within the poem and with the other mountain poems, insisting on the reality of the concrete world, yet at the same time on its transitoriness.

In the final stanza the glacier "waits for all to slow", and "her time is our secret clock". Thus the earth and man are locked together in common bondage to time, just as the face of the land and the face of the man have been permanently scarred by the glacier:

> and the land's long face and mine
> cannot forget is graved
> with her monstrous rutting

The phrase "monstrous rutting" stands out in the otherwise cold and quiet diction of this final stanza. As with all of Birney's heightened phrases, it is rich and meaningful. On the geologic level, it refers to the grooves left by the glacier as she moves across the face of the earth. Yet a "rut" is also a habit or routine, and the poem tells us that this is a habitual rutting, however long the cycles of ice ages may be. But the rutting of the glacier is also the enormous female animal in heat, roaring in sexual anguish and passion for the male to satisfy her. Tragically, however, she remains the eternal virgin, the "madcap virgin" who can never be satisfied.

On a more universal level, the roar of the glacier is powerful and haunting sound of the agony of man's unsatisfied soul, and his fear of the aching void.[10] It is also a roar which purges, by creation of the lines which express it, the poet's fearful ghosts of his own separateness.[11]

The last stanza speaks of the glacier's "cold passion", which is death. Her love is "the rounded silence/ a long hard peace"--the silence and peace of death. And since "her time is our secret clock", Birney is implying but not stating in these final lines that she must in the end embrace us all: mammoth and Siberian, mountain and climber, poet and reader.

The mountain poems in this chapter have been characterized by a new ironic tone whose target is primarily the technological nightmare which modern man has created in order to master the earth and other men. In doing so, however, he has lost his sense of self and his sense of unity with the natural world.

As a result of this loss, some of the poems in this chapter also show a development of the elegiac tone which begins in the early poems "David" and "Biography". The poems thus insist that in spite of man's technical advances, nature and time retain their power over him.

A predominating motif in these poems is the master-servant relationship--for instance, between man and time, earth and time, man and nature, man and machines. Birney succeeds best when he establishes a balanced tone through a balanced form, as in "The Mammoth Corridors".

The poems in this chapter all point out the spiritual and moral losses modern man has suffered, whether he is a miner, a farmer, a capitalist, a tourist, or a businessman. Birney suggests that this loss is partly because he no longer experiences the world directly. Cars and helicopters and motels shield his body from a real encounter with the world, and the PR man's pitch for progress shields his mind and deadens his emotions against a recognition of the hollowness of his life. He has been mesmerized; he is overcome with the forgotten sin of <u>accidia</u>.

It takes a total struggle of mind, body, and heart to renew oneself.

Perhaps the poet can help--as Birney does in his best poems--by using words carefully and sensitively and thus drawing men to an awareness of things they dare not face. Archibald MacLeish says as much in Poetry and Experience:

> The crime against life, the worst of all crimes, is not to feel. And there was never, perhaps, a civilization in which that crime, the crime of torpor, of lethargy, of apathy, the snake-like sin of coldness-at-the-heart, was commoner than in our technological civilization in which the emotionless emotions of adolescent boys are mass produced on television screens to do our feeling for us, and a woman's longing for her life is twisted, by singing commercials, into a longing for a new detergent, family size, which will keep her hands as innocent as though she had never lived. It is the modern death, this commercialized atrophy of the heart. None of us is safe from it. The intellectual life can become technological too no matter what its content, and Acedy, you may recall, was the occupational sin of the medieval clerks. If poetry can call our numbed emotions to life, its plain human usefulness needs no demonstration.[12]

Poetic imperative and moral imperative are thus one and the same: direct experience must always be paramount.

CHAPTER VI

FRIENDSHIP AND MEMORY

It is not only direct experience of the world which modern man needs; it is a direct encounter with other people. The three mountain poems in this chapter explore further the element of friendship which is such an integral part of "David". Birney is here placing more stress on the social interaction between mountain climbers. He thus offers a series of mature and sensitive presentations of the problems and joys of human relationships. In all three poems in this chapter, the encounter between friends takes place with elements of the mountain ethos in the background. The poems are not all success stories, but each narrative proclaims the need for deep human relationships.

The first encounter is between two almost elderly men of different backgrounds in the poem "Four Feet Between" (CP II, 132). The pun in its title, with "four feet" being the number of feet two people have as well as the physical distance between them, indicates a light-hearted mood in this poem which we have not yet encountered, but which is as prevalent in Birney's poetry as the more serious mode which has emerged so far.

This poem focuses on one specific detail of the mountain ethos: the flesh ripped by the mountain rock. This detail provides the immediate situation: "Erola" the traveller waiting for a bus and tending to his feet. He has climbed a volcano and his feet have been stricken by "the agility of lava to mince mainland shoes". We notice that the lava does not merely lie inanimate underfoot, but actively attacks him, which gives us a clue to the personal affront Erola feels. As the poem

opens Erola is "absorbed in masochism and blessing [his] foresight with bandaids". The last phrase has a double meaning as the title does, for he does bless his real foresight in bringing bandaids, but he is also cursing his lack of foresight in reading the mountain conditions. This lack of foresight having caused "ankle-sores" and "heel-cuts", he is now blessing his feet with bandaids. He also blesses the voyagers who brought breadfruit to the island, for the trees now cast their "benison of leaves" upon him.

Birney brings in the idea of perpetuity as Erola ponders the botanical development of breadfruit over a million years, and as in "The Mammoth Corridors" he contrasts his personal learning and lifespan with that of the tree:

> there were some million years of hindsight
> before the breadfruit learned to grow
> 3-foot leaves & cannonball-sized seeds
> to come to terms with perpetuity)
> The cotton foliage on my purpling feet
> argued however that i'd learned nothing much
> from 60 years of being literate
> nothing about coral poison anyway
> or the agility of lava to mince mainland shoes

The ancient theme of nature versus nurture is thus introduced, and it becomes the central theme of the poem. Erola is the man whose learning is inadequate in comparison with the man who is born into a situation and thus copes with it effortlessly.

The appearance of the native tribesman who is his own age gives rise to a comic encounter which develops from suspicion to curiosity to communication to acceptance. The poem gets its dramatic tension and its comedy from the opposition of pairs which creates a formal balance. In the third stanza, for instance, the last lines express this balance:

> A bulbul began bulbuling in the breadfruit overhead
> It stopped & there was only the far surf breathing
> & the two of us

The repetition of "bulbul" is part of the formal balance, but the word is not chosen strictly for its repetitive sound. The bulbul is a bird much prized in the East for its song--it is sometimes called the nightingale of the East. Thus its comic pairing with the earlier greeting "bula bula!" is underlain with a concept of beauty and fleeting loveliness; Birney's erudition and devotion to words is illustrated by his use of a single unusual word which shows the seriousness under the comic situation.

In the three lines quoted above, the call of the bulbul is followed by silence, and then the sound of the surf breathing and the two men breathing. Thus Birney conveys in three short lines--the fulcrum of the poem--the moment of recognition: that the two men are naturally linked by their breathing, and that both are linked to the breathing of the sea.

The next stanza offers a good example of two of Birney's specialties--dialogue and dialect. The two men grope for words, aching to communicate because of their common humanity, but prevented from easy communication because of the language barrier, the mountain which must be climbed. They struggle, with a sense of developing trust and friendship, trying their footholds as David and Bobbie literally did. At one point Erola gets too far ahead of his partner in his urge to verbalize his predicament and his motivations.

But what the language barrier does is to force the obvious on the two men, force them to confront each other more directly and more simply than men usually do. They realize they are probably near the same age;

in an effort to get a handle on this mysterious stranger, the native asks Erola "ow mucha yeara you?" The answer "65" becomes "the spark [that] had leaped the wordgulf". From now on they are friends and communicate more easily.

Finally the "real question" can be asked: "E-ro-la wat wrong a you feet?" As Erola explains, the idea of non-functional climbing or swimming is incomprehensible to the native; but what really bothers him is Erola's bleeding feet, when he has "two unfeeling pedestals of meat/ two tough sun-barbecued planksteaks of feet". Birney uses the "meat-feet" rhyme to comic advantage, and he uses double words to avoid long explanations and create a sense of concreteness in the phrase "sun-barbecued planksteaks", a vivid word-picture of toughness. Again, the single word "pedestals" ostensibly describes the hardness (like a stone statue) of the native's feet, but it also describes Erola's worshipful attitude towards this unbleeding native. This comic but nevertheless genuine worship is reinforced by the image of the native's cousins walking "on white-hot stones for magic or for tourists". The tourists see this as a spectacle, but for the natives it is (or was originally) a serious ritual. Tribal rites, too, have left scars on this tough native. Birney's use of the word "cicatriced" is interesting; it sounds like an exotic word but is actually Latin: "the scar of a healed wound". All men's flesh is vulnerable.

The poem ends quickly: the trouble with Erola's feet is that he wasn't born on the island. There are no deep or extended philosophical meanings. The poem is chiefly a dramatic vignette, though it has serious themes. It is a mountain poem in that it has the images of feet and climbing, the volcano, the ripped flesh, the resting under a shady tree,

the sea, breathing and silence, and balance. It is a small and lovely and funny poem, based no doubt on a real experience which Birney has "captured whole in a net of words".

I shall now consider two complex and, I think, well-realized poems, "Once High Upon a Hill" and "The Gray Woods Exploding". Both are at the edges of the mountain ethos, yet the background provided by the other mountain poems contributes a great deal to their success. Both poems deal primarily with relationships between people, discoveries and journeys, and they are thus an extension of the "David" and "Four Feet Between" mountain poems rather than the more solitary moods of "Biography", "Bushed", "Daybreak", and "The Mammoth Corridors". These two poems also include the element of memory as does "David": the poems are narrated by older men looking back on their experiences, at "emotion recollected in tranquillity".

"Once High Upon a Hill" (CP I, 40) is a narrative poem full of the energy of vivid vocabulary and the enthusiasm of youth, now remembered, now lost. Thus it becomes a bittersweet elegy for time past, for the narrator's "day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains". I include it as a mountain poem, though the "mountain" is a hill in the middle of a city, because its up-down movements are so obviously stressed by Birney, because climbing the hill represents the same sort of escape as mountain climbing in other poems, and because it offers the only explanation Birney will give of the meaning of "up" and "down".

Thus the poem opens with the following "explanation":

> Up was down was up enchanted & still is
> or else to look back so far is to escape all gravities

Perfectly clear. Memory of the past erases all directional signs

there might have been, and "up" and "down" have lost their geographical rigidity. This poem will escape gravity; that is, seriousness as well as the pull of earth, pulling man towards the grindstone. Also, the wobbling balance between up and down, past and present, will become the formal principle in this poem--a balancing or juggling of opposites. But the balance will be tenuously held, for movement and energy are the key to this poem.

The young men "me" and "Slim" are the David and Bobbie of San Francisco, escaped from Canada and camping:

> Our tent a 20$ furnished shack complete with fleas
> propped on a gusty ledge of hill

The language of the poem is quick and colloquial, with many casual phrases expressing the preoccupations of two young men who are often simply overgrown adolescents.

At dawn, the first morning in their "wobbly hideout", Guilio's goat stares down at them. This is certainly a real mountain, complete with goats and sheep. When they open the window to smell their Freedom, however:

> What filtered through the dockweed demonstration
> occupying the sheeptrack we had for lane
> was purest ramstink

Nevertheless they feel the vertigo of youth as up and down have no meaning; they are simply high: "Down was up & sidewise & every map Italian". As Birney says in "Mappemounde", even if there are maps, they are useless: either we can't understand them or else the sea can't really be charted.

The young men smell "grapemash" as well as "ramstink". Birney uses countless double words in this poem, kennings which make the picture of the past concrete and alive because of their concentration of nouns.

Words such as "hideout" (a marvellous kids' word), "rockcave", "dock-weed", "sheeptrack", "ramstink", "broomcloset", "lilybed" are compressed and wildly energetic and give a sense of gaiety to the poem.

Birney's emphasis on smells gives immediacy to the poem as well:

> It's taken some forty years for me to know which smells
> and frenzies last: the sound of laughter's with them

By juxtaposition, he makes even laughter a delicious smell. Though this is a poem recalling the past, it has the immediacy of the present and of youth:

> I'd have to think hard what my worries were
> tremendous surely for us both at 25 bad as now

When he catalogues the worries of these two sellers of pickles and English, however, he finds they don't give "one good stink for savouring".

The eating of lunch beside a clean brook in the woods near Berkeley is part of the mountain ethos and should thus be innocent enjoyment, but it is marred by the "sick smells of academia/ its boardinghouses & its sweatshops & fake scholars". Academic life is portrayed as a rotten smell, and to escape this smell--a smell of phoniness--is the boys' aim: "Escape was on the Hill Hell the bloody themes". Note how this line is balanced with an up-down motion; the Hill is heaven, and Hell is downward. The pair of words thus balances sound and idea.

The next stanza repeats the catch phrase of the poem: "Lucky devils it seemed we had it all updown & sideways". Birney returns to the phrase "updown & sideways" throughout the poem as to a "hook" in a modern pop song. One could say as to the theme in a symphony, if one were inclined to be fine and literary in one's analogies, but it wouldn't be appropriate for this poem. This is a crazy, jazzy song

with a hook.

The next stanza has "downcast as well as uptight bewitched & buggered"--two sets of balanced words which express the young men's frustrations as being equal to their joys. There is also a question from the narrator to Slim:

> Is that how you recall us my old/young fellow-batch?
> I doubt it we cast our balances from different figures
> but the column stands elysian on the Hill
> If not no matter since nothing does but when it's there
> & beatitude alive's too fast for savouring it's drunk like water

To explain these lines fully is impossible, for in their expressions of dualities and slippery eternals lie all the paradox and reality of the whole poem, and of all Birney's poems. Birney plays with the ideas of doubleness and balance in this passage. Slim is an "old/young" man--old in the present cold reality, yet always young in the warmth of the past remembered. Birney at this point stops for a moment the crazy up-down dance he has been enjoying, and thinks about the meaning of his memories.

In the second line quoted above he uses the word "balance" as an accountant would, for he is tallying up the past. But in the next line the "column" of debit and credit and balance becomes a visual and concrete image, standing up on a real (i.e. physical) hill, thrust up like a single tree, like a mountain peak, like The Finger, like a nunatak, like a sundial: all these images become in this poem the emblem or symbol of elysium, joy thrusting itself defiantly and stubbornly upward. Thus, though Slim and the narrator cast their balances from different figures, for both at least "the column stands elysian on the Hill".

The next line uses the empty and spare words of the balance point, where words are inadequate to convey the feeling of the moment: "If not no matter since nothing does but when it's there". The line also asserts the primacy of the immediate experience.

To illustrate Birney's skill in manipulating words to somehow capture the uncapturable train of thought-remembrance-feeling-idea which flows through this passage, the very next line runs like the water it images: "& beatitude alive's too fast for savouring it's drunk like water". This is a quicksilver line, the meaning of which is impossible to grasp on first reading, for the words ripple and move as fast as the moment of reading them leaves us. How does Birney achieve this effect? He uses the complex word "beatitude" and juxtaposes it in an unusual metaphoric way with the simple word "alive". What is "beatitude alive"? Then he buries the verb in an apostrophe, and by the time we slip over the words "too fast" we're at the slow and ponderous "savouring", but we've lost what we were trying to savour--which is exactly the point Birney is trying to make. His use of language here mirrors and reinforces his meaning--which is that "meaning" and "significance" are always elusive, and sometimes obscure.

In the next two stanzas we notice several details of the mountain ethos. The young men climb in the evenings, and descend to the workday world every morning:

> We changed at evening to scarves
> & climbed the crazy staircase-streets to Merto's
> ...weekday mornings of course the world beheld us
> falling headlong to the Embarcadero trains

Ironically, Merto is in Folsom on a "legging rap" (streetwalking)--a sly use of the legs-feet complex. And this stanza also gives a sly reference to blood: the margins of the narrator's papers are "bloodstained

with [his] aborted lyrics"; Birney takes the red pencil literally.

That the hill the young men live on is called "our only City's only Matterhorn" brings attention to the mountain aspect of the poem, though it is no doubt meant to be comic hyperbole. The young men are "prentice guides" on this ersatz Matterhorn, and they use their hands and feet to make direct contact with their mountain. In fact, Birney explicitly says that they had no vehicles of any kind, unlike the middle-aged traveller in "The Mammoth Corridors":

> No wheels at all not even bikes only the feet of cavemen
> falling down a ladder jungle
> & overhanding up again by wood lianas
> to fire & sleep in doubly-blind stone alleys

The words "cavemen" and "lianas" link the climbing experience of these young men with that of other young men far removed in time and space. The narrator and Slim rest beside fires on the edge of a cliff, albeit a "Wop cliff" which is "grounded like a wobbly hinge beside the Golden Gate", and we again see the ever-present vocabulary of balancing.

Birney makes some reference to the symbolic meanings of such terms as "Golden Gate", though only in retrospect as the older man muses on connections which did not occur to his younger self:

> Come to think of it we never missed the Bridges
> the Gate's own Self was there the way Drake saw it
> the Bay open to the Philippines

The gate is the opening to endless possibilities--the possibilities of open ocean and distant islands--but these are my speculations. Birney is deliberately vague and refuses to pin down his meaning exactly, for he obviously wishes to leave all possibilities open to the reader; and anyway, how can one pin down memory...or self? There is purpose in Birney's stubborn refusal to pin things down, in this poem and in other poems.

The stanza continues with characteristic Birney philosophizing, the older man musing about the ultimate meaning of life. But he is embarrassed and mocks his presumptuousness in the phrase "when capitalized". To put the immediate situation in the foreground, the young men are jailed every morning and escape every evening, in another repetition of the poem's up-down movements:

> ...All our wooden centipedes jacknifing us plumb down
> to separate jails at morning's 8 & up again to Life
> at sundown whatever Life is when capitalized
> Something that whirls at least however senseless
> The moment transient as smoke yet tall in dreams
> as when a great tree or steeple catches fire

Life is defined as something transient, whirling. That is, ultimate meanings are never solid and fixed and static. Birney's simile of a great tree catching fire is akin to the lightning-scarred tree of "David" and looks forward to the forest fire in "Gray Woods Exploding". Again, the tree-steeple image is the upward-thrusting fist or column which stands out in the landscape, like the moment stands out from the onward drone of time.

Life, then, is lived in single moments which are at the same time tall and significant yet transient and insubstantial. Birney can only make them real by fidelity to the experience, through concrete images rather than abstract reasoning and leisurely cogitation.

After the simile, the fulcrum of the poem, the mood changes. The moment on the Hill is over and Birney presents the quick descent in a straightforward, accepting manner: "We'd had a mere 3 months a something but no Eden".

As the narrator describes their last extravagant fling in a fancy hotel, he suddenly realizes that perhaps his memory is constructing dreams rather than reconstructing reality.

Or did we? am I maundering now of other girls timespaces
It's possible Imagination makes numerals or Venus
from the seafoam art's not the only way to simplify the past
senility will do or plain laziness

Birney here uses a double word "timespaces" to convey the sense that each moment is a separate, tangible entity composed of its own space and time. His comment on art shows that his poems, though renderings of direct experience, are not experience themselves but a simplification of past experience.

As the narrator speculates further on the role of memory in life and art, Birney offers a series of paradoxes and double meanings. The doubleness of the language, with its repetitions and reversals, expresses by its very form the idea that memory is our master, not our servant:

I tell it so far as memory's concerned
& memory's now the only one concerned
a destructive child breaking up tabulae for toys
There's some things we forget to keep in mind
& others we are mindful to forget
In the end we never face the truth that nothing's done
that matters unless it opens to the butterfly
the caterpillar planned & even that's a thing of one-day matter

We can't control our memories; we can't even control our experiences. This idea is so important to Birney that he devotes a whole poem to it: "Memory No Servant". What matters in life? What's important? How free are we? Birney raises the questions but provides no clear answers, because there are none. The caterpillar plans the butterfly, but even the butterfly lasts only one day.

The rest of the poem continues Birney's peculiar form of philosophizing, and we must accept it for what it is. Life with a capital L is intangible insofar as rational explanations are concerned. Experience can be lived but not 'propositionalized'. But words can capture

a sense of vertigo, juggling, intangibility, balance, by giving a series of intuitively related images--water, smoke, mist, fire, seafoam, butterfly, stars spinning--and a series of doublewords--timespace, updown, haymow, seesaw, bloodmoney, seacliff, windstink.

Birney gives an "all the world's a stage" passage to reinforce this idea, but he doesn't know who plays which roles, and he admits that all the narrator and Slim were doing was "juggling apprehensions and misapprehensions". The play they were in has no Aristotelian unity but is instead the Polonian conglomerate, "a comical-historical-pastoral goatplay called Cloudcuckooland". Explanations, indeed!

Whatever roles they played, at least the narrator is grateful they had no time to conceive of themselves as heroes. Perhaps to be a hero requires a fixed and certain conception of the universe and one's place in it, even if that conception is wrong. Birney the poet and the narrator of this poem have no self-delusions. They are ordinary people full of paradoxes, contradictions, joys, sorrows, and all the unresolved polarities.

The memory of the time on the Hill remains, not exactly accurate but full of impressions and memories which Birney merges in further kennings and images of precarious balance. The final meaning of the poem is in its language which manages to suspend gravity and time with its juggling of images and concepts.

The last stanza repeats the question "Or did we?" and gives the images of somersault and ferris wheel. What finally emerges as important is the movement of life, the gusto, the active and direct experience of life:

> No matter whatever was our ferris wheel went round
> with gusto its motion made a tune a living one

allegro not death's his rigadoon won't sound
till all that turning stops & we are neither sideways
up nor blissful down but free for all or nothing

The end, of course, is death--the stillness and silence after the whirling and noise. And so this poem, too, ends on an elegiac note.

"The Gray Woods Exploding" (CP II, 112) is a narrative with a mountain background, but the foreground of the poem is the development and decline of a brief but close relationship between two men. "Once High Upon a Hill" also has two men characters, but since it is the reminiscence of one who has long since lost touch with the other, it is essentially a solitary musing on the meaning of a youthful experience. "Gray Woods" is in the present, developing the experience of friendship as it happens--or as it fails to happen. For the friendship is aborted before it can develop into a long-lasting relationship because one of the men (the narrator) moves too quickly and tries to invade the other's unreachable territory. At the top of every mountain lies the always unreachable Sun: this poem presents the mountain as psychological space.

The poem begins with the escape motif. The narrator Earle is in an airplane over Australia "flying from the dry pall of the city." The first stanza introduces images of dryness and hardness--"roads wrinkle", "dun range", and "the skin of a land hard & vacant"--images which will be developed throughout the poem.

The image of land as skin is taken from earlier poems such as "What's So Big About Green?". If this poem follows the previously established pattern, we expect the land's skin to be ripped open. And it happens: the skin of the earth is ripped open by the bulldozer digging for bauxite. Part (2) presents the image of the gray woods exploding in fire, but this is not really a ripping of skin; it is a breakthrough

of wildness and destruction in a landscape seemingly gray forever. The real breaking of skin occurs when the tough skin which has hardened over Jack's life is cut open. His life, like the hard earth, is portrayed as gray, drab, and dry with surprising explosions of colour, creativity, and temper. His face is actually scarred, the torn flesh having been healed by time, and he softens his dry and hard exterior just enough to allow Earle the presumption of breaking open his scars with clumsy and hurting probes.

When Earle first meets Jack, the latter "breathes bleakness" and his face is as dry as the land:

> I sit upright in his office cave
> hung round with books like stalactites
> & stare into pale eyes a face ungiving
> obscurely scarred

Jack has a "bush of hair drab as old tumbleweed"--ready for a spark to ignite it, for this image appears in Part (4) juxtaposed with the account in Part (3) of the forest fire "pricked by a campfire spark". The images of dryness extend to the town where the university is located, which is blown by "October's wind/ mottling the general flesh." The university itself presents the "lacklustre fronts" of the species "Academicus anaemicus", while the cafeteria is described as "the usual dismal student caf".

In Part (6) Jack takes his guest up into the hills, escaping from the town and the university into the "drywine sunlight", and we see Birney using elements of the mountain ethos. They start their climb in a landrover, which is "smoking our dust into gumtrees" and Birney continues images of dryness with such lines as "The words thin into mallee scrub and wanness". The element of dryness is new in the mountain ethos; Birney naturally must change according to the different

mountains he describes.

In Part (7) they leave the vehicle and set out on foot to approach each other the same way they experience the landscape--more directly:

> Leaving the car we tread over leaves like paper
> under a stiff blue sky & in seconds
> stand on a gulf edge--
> face blotched by vanished cascades
> granite sheering to depths unseeable
> like an Andean chasm
> We sit dangling our feet over silence
> The smell of height stirs me
> & I want to go below surfaces

As on other mountain tops, the climbers feel breathlessness and wonder in the silence. They stand on the edge and then dangle their feet over the chasm. "Depths" and "surfaces" become psychological, and the "face blotched by vanished cascades" is not only the effect of waterfalls on the rockface but the human face blotched by past tears. When Earle says "I want to go below surfaces" it is clear that Birney is using the familiar mountain imagery to symbolize psychological states in this poem.

Earle's questions make Jack edgy, and he tries to escape more questions by descending the mountain to a safer and more closed psychological place. Jack is reluctant to face the real experience of open communication; he wants to keep his heart locked like The Wanderer. But at the same time he is eager to communicate, sensing a gentleness of understanding in Earle. This vacillation is psychologically believable: he is dangling on the edge and has not been unaffected by the mountain heights. Thus he offers, in Part (8), a bit of unsolicited information before they return down the mountain:

> A mate of mine came here once
> to jump off changed his mind
> said it queered his pitch
> not seeing ahead where he'd land

This is another new element in the mountain mystique: the desire to commit suicide by jumping. This passage also shows the earth, hard and solid, as a place of certainty and the air as uncertainty. There are no maps here; as Jack enters unknown territory and begins to open himself to Earle, his eyes are "leaf green" and "darting" yet "still unbetraying" and he manages to keep his tone of voice flat and hard. He says his story is "boring & it hasn't an ending", but in Part (9) "grudgingly almost he sketches it in".

Birney uses light imagery now to convey a sense of developing trust: the trunks of the "slaty gums" become "radiant now in the slant light". It is significant that the time is sunset and the light is not full and open, for Jack is certainly not revealing himself completely. The tension of the situation becomes palpable as Birney creates a precarious balance between questions and answers, pushing and giving, opening and closing, forward movement and retreat. Earle's questions are prodding instruments, and Jack becomes "frightened" and "nettled".

Both of Pat's vocations described in Part (9) involve ripping open the flesh of the earth, and since this tearing open is morally wrong to Pat he simply can't continue it. Pat's reluctance to rape the environment is an effective and subtle expression of the "save the earth" philosophy expounded rather blatantly in "What's So Big About Green?"

Birney's use of the word "blood" is interesting in Part (9). He twice uses the colloquialism "bloody": "What a bloody thing that was/ to do to the Great Barrier Reef" and "it was a bloody thing to do to beaches". Then he takes the word literally when he says that Pat

was "spitting out blood with aluminum". The line has a double meaning which links man and earth, for the aluminum specks get into Pat's blood, yet the aluminum itself is part of the blood of the earth. There are similarities with "Man on A Tractor" where the driver chokes on dust as the earth enters his throat and lungs, and the tractor unrolls the earth's flesh. Part (9) ends with a dryness in the throat and they resolve to have a beer; Jack says "I'm perishin thirsty". His dry throat is an obvious sign of emotional tension.

Stanza (10) unravels more of Pat's story; his moment of heroism during a fire is like the moment of triumph "transient as smoke" in "Once High Upon a Hill". The heroism ends in a moral stand-off between Pat and the crooked sergeant--another expression of tension between people. The struggle for power, the balance between the men, is also expressed in the line "I'm just telling you what a man did or was done to". Is man a master of his experiences or their servant? The implication is that a man doesn't necessarily control what he does, but what happens to him can control him. Later in the poem, as Jack recounts Pat's further struggles to escape his past, we see that a man's past can control his present actions and how other people react to him.

In Part (11) Jack and Earle drive through the "darkening suburbs" to Jack's home. The images of drabness--"a scraggly hedge", "dead grass", and "blank house-door"--are balanced by the surprising images of brightness, colour, and flame. First a "small waratah [shrub] lifts its quiet bonfire of bloom in the dusk" and then Jack's living room is revealed when the door is opened:

> so jumping with strangeness & colour
> i'm mortified again at my own failure
> to foresee this professor's complexity

The walls flicker with ochre coils
aboriginal paintings on bark & Namatjiras
Drysdales a good Piper (from London days?)
Javanese batiks colour photos of seasnakes & Darwin eagles
Scattered around the floor between ferns
some strangely infolded sculpture

The description of the room is filled with precise detail and proper names, which gives immediacy to the situation. The picture of flickering life is painted by Birney using images of fire, coils, snakes, wings, and ferns, and the scene is a repetition of the "gray woods exploding" at the beginning of the poem. It is also reminiscent of the opening of the door to light and song and dancing in "Pachucan Miners".

Birney chooses to portray the blossoming and exploding inner world of Jack in terms of artworks, including music, sculpture, drama ("Melbourne playbills"), photography, painting, textile art, aboriginal art, and even poetry ("photos of Aussie poets"). This is a subtle statement by Birney that the inner creativity of a man can be a surprising explosion which gives depth and wonder to an otherwise drab and gray life. This is surely a symbol of the creative spark which flickers inside men's outer shells but only once in a while explodes into fire. Birney expresses a similar blossoming of artistic creativity in "Driftwood Sculptor" (CP I, 137):

Then with a cedar key of quiet
unlocked his mind's gray penitentiary
released old lifer dreams
With peeled alders gleaming like octaroons
raised beauty
as grass after footsteps

Brought flotsam
sodden with long sea-troubling
to lighten like lizards on a sun-cleaved cliff
...
out of the aching urge and surge in all of us
to waken the unseen shape
prisoned within our driftwood

Jack comes back to the story of Pat, and we see how Birney skillfully interweaves two tales and two voices in this poem to create a tension between past and present out of Jack's need to distance himself from real experience. Finally the past and the present merge in the dreadful moment of Earle's destructive faux-pas.

Images of dryness continue to pile up like tinder as Jack finishes his story: he drinks "dry wine" and brandy to wet his parched throat, his face is a "sallow mask" (behind which his real face is hiding), "his voice swings from dryness to something like anguish", and finally the "laconic tone is back & the sombre laugh". Birney manipulates the conversation convincingly, with the sounds of Jack's blocked throat and faltering voice adding to the effect of his difficulty in communicating.

The story itself is a chronicle of Pat trying to escape his past: "He hitched & 'sundowned' till he'd put a thousand miles/ between the past & himself". But his past finally forces him to the edge of the cliff:

> Why? O--the bloody cliff!
> Can't you guess? The past caught up again
> &--well we've all got lots to grizzle about

The word "grizzle" may be Australian idiom, but I find it unusual. Upon investigating, I find that Birney uses this single word with a deft poetic touch. The word comes from the Old French "gris", meaning "gray fur", and thus as an adjective it fits with the title and images of grayness throughout the poem. As a verb, "to grizzle" means "to fret", perhaps because fretting is said to cause gray hairs. But its principal meaning is "to fret, to sulk, to cry in a whining or whimpering fashion" (OED).

I find Birney's use of a single unusual word which fits perfectly in a context to be an exciting facet of his poetry. He is obviously erudite, obviously fascinated with words. As he says in a comment on "Aluroid", he is a "word-hoarding writer":

> ...I regard all the million words in the English language as available to poets, and for this particular poem I've made a rule that I want readers willing to look up a word they don't know.[1]

Thus I've made it a habit to use the OED, and I'm rewarded whenever I do, for Birney chooses his words carefully with full awareness of all their connotations, historical and even archaic. But he doesn't usually strew his poems with "hard" words to display his erudition, for he wants to make his poems direct and accessible. He saves such words for crucial places where they will add depths of meaning at an important juncture in a poem.

So it is here, with "we've all got lots to grizzle about" being an understatement of one of the major themes of the poem. The word appears at the moment of "explanation" about the cliff, and it supports the image structure of the poem. It also hints at the "grizzly" hidden inside everyone.[2] Furthermore, the meaning "to whine and complain" is picked up at the moment of emotional explosion, when Earle makes the wrong move and Jack's temper flares:

> It's the wrong gambit His face suffuses
> till the scars of his burns stand blackly out
> It's nobody's fucking business where!
> Don't imagine I've been telling you my life
> Whining and whipping the cat--! Doctor!--

In the climax of the poem Birney focuses on Jack's scarred face. By having the narrator identify Jack's scars as burns, Birney is distancing himself from the question of Pat's identity. We must be careful to recognize in the dramatic situation that Earle is a character who may

be mistaken. Though all the clues seem to suggest that Jack is Pat, particularly Jack's explosion of temper and his previous nervousness at hints and gropings by Earle, Birney never answers the question "Is Jack really Pat"? By maintaining an element of uncertainty, Birney is leaving the reader in the air and forcing him to recognize the importance of the explosion itself. For such explosions often happen between people, and we never really understand why. The inner core of another person is ultimately unreachable; though we may climb the mountain and experience wonder and awe, the sun can never be embraced and known.

The imagery of light and fire suggests that this correlation between sun and personality is not merely fanciful. At the face-to-face confrontation Jack's "eyes are flint & sparked with fire". The retreat into "bleak" and "pale apologies" is like the sun retreating behind the clouds in "David".

Stanza (12) is the quick denouement after the peak of blazing emotion which has just occurred. It is significant that the poem ends at night, without the sun, in coldness, with the stars "small & dingy". Yet at least a spark remains, as it does in the early poem "Vancouver Lights" (CP I, 71), where the poet stands "On this mountain's brutish forehead with terror of space" and affirms in a small voice (though he doesn't identify the light): "We are a spark beleaguered/ by darkness this twinkle we make in a corner of emptiness".

"The Gray Woods Exploding" does not end without a final flash in the night sky: "A meteor flashes/ brightens to fireball in a second burns out". The association between the meteor and the bright-burning but fleeting friendship is obvious. There are no maps for the sky any more than for the sea, though the stars fall into general patterns.

The relationship between Jack and Earle has been a quick flash in Earle's otherwise gray life, a chance encounter which happened "a wink ago in the world's eye". Or to use lines from "Once High Upon a Hill" which are equally apropos, their relationship has been:

> The moment transient as smoke yet tall in dreams
> as when a great tree or steeple catches fire

In retrospect, the two opening stanzas of "The Gray Woods Exploding" become packed with symbolic meaning. They are emblematic stanzas "to be fully understood only when the poem was ended", as Birney says about writing "David".[3] I did not discuss them until now because they gain so much force in the light of the relationship between Earle and Jack.

Earle is the observer in the plane, watching with surprise as the gray woods beneath him explode with fire:

> (2)
> But suddenly all is tressed
> with turbulence
> violet smoke rocketing up & away to the Tasman
> Fire is loose wild in a hundred hills
> & the gray woods exploding
>
> Somewhere between the red cores
> of combustion there must be birds
> falling & screaming horses
> in flight from this fearful beauty
> marsupials men ambushed
> each creature whirling away
> from the palsied will of the trees
> to die & immolate all
> in a violence of comets over the quiet sea
>
> (3)
> The plane floats untouched
> but i hear again that lone ghost-gum in the Olgas
> pricked by a campfire spark
> roaring to sacrifice
> the air filled in an instant with crimson tongues
> & the screech & outswoop of parrots

in the time of remembering
i drift beyond sight of perdition
& look down again on mere grayness

Bored & inert as gods we descend cloudwrapped
to the darkening human valleys

This is more than a straightforward description of a fire, though the details are vivid and precise. Birney is also describing the isolation of Earle, floating high above the fire, looking down on it objectively, dispassionately. He is insulated in the silence of the plane from the screaming horses and birds trying to escape the fire. Ironically, they are "in flight from this fearful beauty", as Earle and Jack flee from the fearful beauty of friendship. Though Earle knows the animals are there, his knowledge of their panic and fear is cold and intellectual. As Birney says "The plane floats untouched". The words "sacrifice" and "perdition" indicate the guilt he feels now, and the guilt he will feel later. They also recall the theme of sacrifice in both "Machu Picchu" and "The Mammoth Corridors".

The last two lines of Part (3) express the isolation of human beings who descend "bored & inert as gods" to the "darkening human valleys". The descent is to screaming and noise, away from the silence and idealism of solitude in the skies. Birney presents a picture of the alienated "cloudwrapped" man who does not take part in the normal give-and-take of human relationships. Thus we see quite a different aspect of the silent view from the heights. In "David" it may have been good and beautiful to escape from the "ruck of the camp", but to escape too high and too completely is to risk losing touch with other people. Is this what happened to the climber in "Biography" and the man in "Bushed"? Birney suggests that we cannot be objective and uninvolved; we are not gods who are above the wranglings of human

living.

The poem thus becomes a tragedy of botched friendship, a friendship which could have been, between a man afraid to open himself because of so many previous burns and scars and a man who longed to touch him but tragically misread the delicate signs of caution. Earle's shortcoming is insensitivity; indeed, he states that he feels ashamed for failing to sense his new friend's complexities. Neither man is entirely to blame, however. Both are culpable--Jack because he is too edgy, too hard, too reticent; and Earle because he is too inquisitive, too eager to be close, too insensitive to the other man's taboos. It's a stand-off. Though it is obviously Earle in the plane, it could just as easily be Jack, an academic who has travelled as much and has the same tendency toward objectivity.

In this poem Birney has thus developed a complex picture of a human relationship, and his psychological sensitivity is matched by, and expressed in, his fine sensitivity to words and their hidden explosions of meaning. This is Birney at his best, manipulating two narrative lines, developing a set of reverberating images of grayness and fiery explosiveness, and juxtaposing a human narrative with a symbolic introduction which has its own narrative reality. While remaining always in the world of direct experience, he manages to comment on the wider issue of man's alienation from his fellow man without preaching or philosophizing. Instead, the immediacy of the situation touches us as a series of abstractions never could.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

> O schoolmates, in youth blossoming and tall with talents,
> We must now in the arrogance of our knowledge
> Uproot our scented careers
> Fingering mountains only, and rivers,
> To hold poetry alive in our minds.[1]

It is not enough to be arrogant in the knowledge that the mountain is a place of rich and varied experiences. Having identified the mountain and its complex of related images in many of Birney's poems, two questions remain to be asked, if not answered. Is the mountain a literary symbol? If so, what does the symbolic mountain mean? I propose in this concluding chapter to answer the first question with "yes", and the second more tentatively.

Birney has transformed his personal mountain experiences into poetry, feeling a deep need[2] to communicate to others the mysteries of the mountain. In analyzing his poems, it is also necessary to move from the natural object, the mountain perceived, to the symbolic object, the mountain meaningful. Herbert Read says:

> ...an adequate criticism must account for 'duplicity' in art--for the presence, in every complete work of art, of both aesthetic and ethical values (but not judgments). It is a distinction between visualization and significance.[3]

In explaining how this movement from perception to meaning occurs, Read cites Jacques Maritain on the presence of symbolism in works of art:

> ...art never stops...at shapes or colours, or at sounds or words, considered in themselves and <u>as things</u> (they must be so considered to begin with, that is the first condition, but considers them <u>also</u> as making known something other than themselves, that is to say <u>as symbols</u>. ...And the more charged with symbolism the work

> of art (but spontaneous symbolism intuitively apprehended, not hieroglyphic symbolism), the more immense, the richer and the higher will be the possibility of joy and beauty.[4]

Birney as a proponent of concrete poetry would insist that this symbolic approach is not the only criterion of "richer and higher" art, but in his mountain poems he is working a more traditional poetic mode. Yet I do not suggest that Birney deliberately set out to write a cluster of symbolic mountain poems; rather, his mountain poems offer "spontaneous symbolism intuitively apprehended".

There are many definitions of a symbol in literary criticism, most of which stress the reality of the symbol in the foreground and the many facets of meaning which it suggests. For instance, David Perkins in The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats defines a symbol as:

> ...a key image which taps and summarizes a dense and often fluid complex of doubts, intuitions, emotions, preoccupations, and the like. As such it may appear throughout the body of a poet's work as a recurrent metaphor extending and deepening its significance from context to context....one can distinguish a symbol when the image used calls for a weight of response beyond what we should ordinarily be expected to grant and, secondly, when the image is elaborated at some length without much overt metaphoric reference. In other words, the second term of the comparison is not made obvious, either because it is not fully possessed by the writer or because its metaphoric reach is too complex and many-faceted.[5]

One of the best definitions, however, is that offered by Donald Stauffer, who lists ten characteristics of imaginative poetic symbols as Yeats used them in his poetry and wrote of them in his prose. Stauffer's ten characteristics embrace and extend similar definitions of literary symbolism by other critics. These are his ten features of a symbol:

1. Each is unified and indivisible.
2. Each has a meaning....

3. Though a symbol is as indivisible as a perfect sphere, one may view its hemispheres, seeing the permanent expressed in the particular, the dreaming in the waking, the boundless in the bounded.
4. This complex meaning is untranslatable; it cannot be satisfactorily expressed in other terms.
5. Each symbol is inexhaustibly suggestive, rooted in the past, whether the past is that of the artist or of mankind.
6. Each symbol has a moral meaning, in the wide sense that a sympathetic awareness of reality makes men better.
7. Each symbol is self-creating, and cannot be deliberately sought.
8. Each symbol grows slowly, its existence often realized before its meaning is understood.
9. Every artist has his central symbol, or a group of related symbols that form a dominating symbolic pattern.
10. And finally, this unified symbol constitutes a revelation.[6]

In Stauffer's and in Perkins' terms, Birney's mountain is a bona fide literary symbol. Some of Stauffer's ten features of a symbol are self-explanatory; others require a certain amount of elaboration, especially as they relate to Birney's mountain.

The first feature, applied to Birney's mountain, I interpret as unity of the natural world: animals, plants, and man; the unity of a man's heart, mind, spirit, and physical body; and unity of form and expression in art. We have seen how the mountain experience, unified in itself, reveals the unity of the natural world, and how the climber must involve all his faculties when striving for the peak. And the varieties of form, imagery, and diction which Birney displays in his mountain poems show how his artistic expression in inseparable from, and changes with, his subject.

The second feature, meaning, implies simply that the image of the mountain is not restrictive but has wider meanings. The mountain is not just a pretty or a terrifying or a sublime landscape, and Birney's poems are never mere description. Birney uses the mountain ethos to emphasize and reveal many themes and meanings without stating them directly, though the mountain images always retain their literal meaning.

The third feature is closely aligned with the second: the particular details of the mountain ethos embody the universals of life. As Yeats says:

> True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound, every colour, every gesture, a signature of some unanalyzable imaginative essence.[7]

I have dealt with this concept extensively in my introductory chapters and throughout my discussions of the poems. As one example, the upward thrusting movements of fists, trees, peaks, columns, and dancers in the mountain poems represent defiance or stubbornness, a refusal to die or to live a vapid life, an expression of energy. Mrs. Anyone's statement in "Damnation of Vancouver" is another expression of this defiance: "It's my defiant fear keeps green this whirling world."[8] There are still several layers to this explanation, but this is the fourth feature of a symbol: "its complex meaning is untranslatable; it cannot satisfactorily be expressed in other terms." When the glacier groans and roars in "The Mammoth Corridors", it carries all the weight of unsatisfied, unsatisfiable, and unnamable desires.

Fifthly, a symbol is inexhaustibly suggestive; we have seen how many levels of meaning the mountain reveals in the various poems, while remaining stubbornly itself. As Stauffer says:

> Rooted in tradition, trancelike, inexhaustible--how obvious it should be that the symbol cannot be translated into common terms, or survive the ordeal of discursive reason![9]

This is the reason, then, for Birney's refusal, finally, to deal in abstractions; the reason he turns to the extreme opposite of abstraction in concrete poetry; the reason, too, for his often-repeated claim that he is on the side of the madmen and magicians, the singers

and howlers:

> Poetry's basically a mad affair; it's not logical at all....But the bardic madness is more than mere verbal anarchism. The poet is really a dealer in magic, in incantation; he hums and fumbles for rhythms and cadences in an uncharted world of sound, knowing only that he may by luck, or the visitation of some Genie, hit upon a series of breathings that will raise words from mere noise to the incredible power of a spell.
> ...
> I strive, in this herding age, to remain a cayuse, an unbroken horse....I'll even settle for the role of the coyote, that lonely yapping ornery stinking enduring snooty creature...howling alone....
> But there's more to writing than howling. There's singing. And isn't there lots still to sing about too? Isn't there, in a sense, everything?[10]

The poet howls and sings; he does not explain or expound. At least in his poems. Unfortunately, Birney has offered prose discussions of some of his own poems, which is perhaps an indication of lack of confidence in himself as much as frustration with Canadian critics' neglect.

Yet even when Birney does talk of the meanings of his poems in The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, he says the same thing as Yeats about the multiple and untranslatable meanings of a poem:

> The language of poetry is complex, ambiguous, cunning, and highly personal....It doesn't yield up single 'right' answers to examination questions any more than life does. Perhaps the best way to get full meaning out of a poem is to forget about meaning when you read it. Instead, see with it, smell with it, touch with it, and above all hear with it. A poem is a total sensuous experience.[11]

The symbol does not have the mathematical certainty of allegory. Critic Henry Remak, however, uses mathematical equations to express clearly and succinctly the essential feature of a symbol:

> The metaphor, then, states a specific though unexpected relationship explicitly: x = y; the allegory indicates a specific relationship implicitly: x(=y); the symbol implies an unspecified range of relationships: x = (a + b + c + ...).[12]

Remak also gives a short definition in words of the symbol:

> The symbol is a concrete object or, more rarely, a living being, organic part of the story, which suggests, however, one or more abstract, invisible elements or ideas giving the story a broader, more universal dimension--a Hintergründigkeit--whether these rapports were intended by the poet or not.[13]

Thus the fundamental elements of symbols are multiplicity, implied abstraction and universality, and a concrete reality in the work of art--all of which the mountain fulfills. Remak's final clause also reinforces the comments already made about Birney coming instinctively to the mountain as a symbol.

Part of the fifth characteristic of symbols is that they are "rooted in the past". The mountain is of course rooted in Birney's personal past, but it is also an ancient and worldwide symbol. Thus it is a fortuitous choice for Birney, for it allows readers to bring their own associations to his mountain poems.[14] Yeats encourages this enriching activity on the part of the reader of poetry, for communication of the ineffable mysteries is part of the aim of poetry:

> It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lays emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature.[15]

It has been a constant pleasure and temptation for me, while preparing this study, to make connections between Birney's mountain poems and the myriad meanings which other authors and other ages have as-

cribed to the mountain. Marjorie Nicolson has written an exhaustive study of the changing literary attitudes towards mountains, especially from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, called Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory. Her study is fascinating, although outside the scope of this paper, for its exploration of the broad theme of man and nature which continues to fascinate poets, and of the uses of natural imagery in poetry. Nicolson also suggests to me that opportunities exist for a comparative study of Birney and other Canadian poets such as E.J. Pratt and Ralph Gustafson, with particular attention to their use of images from nature, and how these relate to modern civilization.

Personally, I have found the mountain to be such a suggestive and pervasive symbol that, once noticed, it appears in everything from The New Yorker magazine[16] to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. In the latter, a pop cult novel, the following spiritual meaning of the mountain is offered and, I think, is relevant to Birney's mountain poems. The narrator is travelling through the Rockies in Montana, and he muses--for the mountain wilderness sets the mind free--

> Mountains like these and travelers in the mountains and events that happen to them here are found not only in Zen literature but in the tales of every major religion. The allegory of a physical mountain for the spiritual one that stands between each soul and its goal is an easy one to make. Like those in the valley behind us, most people stand in sight of the spiritual mountains all their lives and never enter them, being content to listen to others who have been there and thus avoid the hardships. Some travel into the mountains accompanied by experienced guides who know the best and least dangerous routes....Still others, inexperienced and untrusting, attempt to make their own routes. Few of these are successful, but occasionally some, by sheer will and luck and grace, do make it. Once there they become more aware than any...that there's no single or fixed number of routes. There are as many routes as there are individual souls.[17]

Pirsig's easy and unaffected moralizing is not to be denigrated. He speaks with the common sense of the ordinary man, and his philosophizing lies behind Birney's mountain poems.[18]

Pirsig's moralizing is closely related to the sixth characteristic: "that each symbol has a moral meaning". Yet Yeats does not advocate narrow morality, moral judgements, or didacticism, and Birney would be the first to agree.[19] For Birney, delight in poetry is always in the foreground:

> It is a survival of primitive spells and exorcisms, and cannot be entered into by anyone who has excluded wonder and mystery from his life; It is the use of words to combine the pleasures of music and dancing, and so cannot be adequately enjoyed without being heard in the inner ear at least, and felt in the body's rhythms.[20]

Yet if the poet embodies universal truths in the particulars of his poetry, he must necessarily be writing moral poetry in the widest sense. The understanding and acceptance which Birney shows for the characters in his poems--David and Bobbie, the madmen of "Bushed" and "Biography", the miners in "Pachucan Miners", the tourists in "Machu Picchu", the weary traveller in "The Mammoth Corridors", the foolish youths in "Once High Upon a Hill", the mismatched friends in "The Gray Woods Exploding"--prove him to be a highly sensitive poet who empathizes rather than judges. Thus aesthetics leads to ethics; as Yeats said:

> ...the imaginative arts were therefore the greatest of Divine revelations, and that sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sins demanded by Christ.[21]

The only moral exhortation which I think Birney would subscribe to is for men to live committed lives, open to all the emotional, physical,

spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of experience. It is this commitment which he brings to his craft of poetry, and this commitment to direct experience which he tries to capture in his amulets of words.

One of the most important moral dimensions of Birney's mountain poems is the respect for the wilderness, for all living creatures and even for the inanimate sun, rock, stars, and ice, which they evoke. "What's So Big About Green?" expresses overtly the moral outrage Birney feels about man's insensitive upsetting of the balance of nature. Yet many of Birney's other mountain poems--particularly "David" and "Daybreak on Lake Opal" for instance--express his underlying belief that the I-Thou relationship between men, and between man and nature, is a moral imperative.

The seventh and eighth characteristics of the symbol are closely related: that it is self-creating and that it grows slowly in the poet's awareness. Stauffer says that "poetic symbols spring to mind suddenly and unexpectedly",[22] and we have Birney's own statement, already quoted, to attest to the fact that he works instinctively rather than logically. The mountain is not a forced or artificial symbol; it is natural and organic with all the growth and variation one finds in nature.

The ninth feature, that "every artist has his central symbol, or a group of related symbols", is what this whole study has been written to prove. According to Yeats, this "central image may dominate and organize subsidiary images, giving pattern to a poet's entire work"[23] and I believe the mountain is such a central symbol in Birney's work. Of course the mountain doesn't appear in all or even most of Birney's poems, taken mathematically. For there is a large part of his work

which is concerned with satire and social commentary. Yet can these not be part of the mountain ethos as well?

As we have seen, one of the main features of the mountain poem is the escape from civilization. The climber goes to the mountain wilderness to free himself for a time from the dehumanizing crowds, machines, pettiness, routines. In Birney's work as a whole, the satirical poems such as "Billboards Build Freedom of Choice", "Underkill", "Anglosaxon Street", "Time Bomb", "World War III", "Restricted Area", "Six-Sided Square: Actopan", "I Accuse Us"--the list goes on and on--represent Birney's view of civilization in all its many aspects. His attitude is not as simplistic as "civilization is bad and wilderness is good". For nature can be as cruel as she is kind (as in "Atlantic Door" and "Bushed"), while civilization can be as loving as it is insensitive (as in "For George Lamming", "there are delicacies", and "Cartagena de Indias"). Birney's Asian and Latin American poems also chronicle various effects of civilization upon nature, and the clash of different civilizations upon each other.

The centrality of the mountain poems can also be illustrated by the importance in his work of the master-servant relationship, the idea of an equally strong pull between two strong forces, which is embodied in the wilderness-civilization duality. Central poems such as "Bear on the Delhi Road", "Arrivals: Wolfville", "Memory No Servant", "The Ebb Begins from Dream", and the pairs of poems "Atlantic Door" and "Pacific Door" with their "deathless feud of the cobra sea and the mongoose wind", "Ellesmereland I" and "Ellesmereland II", and "Man is a Snow", "...Or A Wind" express various struggles between master and servant. These poems show that man is not free. He is caught between

various tensions which pull him towards his civilized nature or his wild nature, both of which have positive and negative aspects. He is caught, too, by his memories, his instincts, and his awareness of death. Thus the escape to the mountain top can be seen as a temporary release from these tensions, and the very balancing each man must do in his life is symbolized by the balance on a knife-edge on the mountain top. The mountain is a varied and rich enough symbol to embrace all these complexities of man's nature and his experiences, and it allows Birney to express these generalities in the particulars of experience and setting.

Besides mountain poems, the wilderness is represented by sea poems (the most important of which is "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth"), wind poems, poems of breath and balance. The latter--for instance "Wind Chimes in a Temple Ruin", "Creeley", "Haiku for a Young Waitress", "These With Wind", "Aluroid", "Epidaurus", among others--are poems which present the moment suspended in time, the moment of heightened awareness, the moment of breathlessness. All these are found in the moment of balance on the mountain top, when the climber rests and listens to his breath and his heart, the wind and the water. Thus the unity of all life, the unity of all Birney's poems, begins to emerge. This unity is based very loosely but nonetheless essentially on the wilderness-civilization dichotomy which finds its iconic centre in the mountain poems.

Finally, "the unified symbol constitutes a revelation". By this, Stauffer says he means that:

> Whenever art uses these powerful and profound symbols, then, poetry opens one of the few portals left into Paradise. For a moment the veil of appearances trembles, and we breathe airs from far and timeless countries.[24]

This is the point at which I must hesitate--not emotionally, for I indeed believe that the mountain is a revelatory symbol and that many of Birney's mountain poems and others give a glimpse behind the veil. I hesitate, however, for two reasons. First, I have never known Birney in any of his writings, prose or poetry, to take on the mantle of the priest-poet, as Irving Layton does, for instance. Nor does Birney express any religious or spiritual beliefs in his poetry. He is devoted to craft and joy, love and art, but when he reaches the veil he does not admit there is anything beyond. He would endorse the following thought by Joseph Wood Krutch, literary critic-cum-naturalist:

> I have never practised the swami's technique for 'heightening consciousness' and I doubt that I ever shall. For one thing, I am not sure that I want to be so exclusively aware of either myself or the All in the colorless essence of either. To put it in a dignified way, I prefer to live under the dome of many-colored glass and to rest content with the general conviction that the white radiance of eternity has something to do with it. To put it more familiarly, what I am after is less to meet God face to face than really to take in a beetle, a frog, or a mountain when I meet one.[25]

Secondly, the argument that poetic symbols are nothing less than revelation can only be proven by emotional and spiritual instinct--a subjective rather than an objective argument. Stauffer crystallizes the dilemma:

> ...the perfect symbol is unanalyzable, so that success must be judged almost proportionately with the failure of any explanations to satisfy: the original symbol is the thing itself, a mystical unity--meaning and image inseparable.[26]

Yet having come this far in characterizing Birney as a poet of instinct rather than reason, a poet who reveals universals though remaining within the concrete world of experience by transforming

those experiences with the power and rhythm and suggestiveness of his magic spells of words, I cannot escape from the tenth and final conclusion: that the mountain poems constitute revelation about human experience. One last quote from Stauffer will reaffirm the inevitability of this conclusion:

> The straight path of the intellect and the will is... not the shortest way home. The road of the Chameleon, Hodos Chameleontos, is one of Yeats's persistent thoughts. This is the winding road of instinctive life, changing colors and directions, the path through a world in which the values are not fixed and certain and universal.[27]

What better way to sum up Birney's path as an artist through every form of poetry, constantly experimenting, changing, revising, always open to new experiences and always ready to write about them?

The man who climbs mountains takes all risks and confronts experience directly and openly; he is as crazy and defiant as the poet. Birney makes a passing comment in The Creative Writer comparing poetry writing with mountain climbing:

> Like mountaineering it requires endurance and an apparently crazy, pointless daring, an ability to perform in a kind of vacuum while aiming for a peak we're never sure we'll reach.[28]

Both poetry writing and mountain climbing exact a long apprenticeship to acquire technical skills, and both require the passion of mind, heart, and body--for poetry as Birney writes it always has the rhythmic swaying of song and dance. Thus the mountain ultimately symbolizes poetry itself, though Birney doesn't make this connection overtly in the mountain poems. Like mountain climbing, poetry is simply an obsession, but it is an obsession tempered by craft.

These two concerns, craft and obsession, dominate The Cow Jumped Over the Moon and The Creative Writer. Birney likes to characterize

himself as a madman and a howler, but he makes it equally clear that he is a careful craftsman. The two roles represent the difference between motive and execution.

The instinctual part of Birney's poetic process lies in his need to write, his choice of subject matter, and his often accidental discovery of natural symbols such as the mountain. His craftsmanship lies in his rendering of experiences which are emotionally or instinctively important to him into poems of more universal significance. We need not take Birney's word for his craftsmanship. This study of Birney's mountain poems demonstrates in a practical way how his flexible use of the mountain as symbol and image--directly, ironically, metaphorically, narratively, and expressionistically--allows him to achieve the transfer of particular into universal without losing any of the wonder and vitality of the original experience.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I

[1]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On the Principles of Genial Criticism," English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 442.

[2]Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), pp. 6-7.

[3]Ibid., p. 9.

[4]Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, 1949), p. 216. The idea of a tangible world which is evoked by a variety and large number of precise words is suggested to me by the comment of Wellek and Warren that the novel "stresses representative detail, 'mimesis' in its narrowest sense." Birney's poetry often displays this kind of mimesis.

[5]Herbert Read, Poetry and Experience (London: Vision Press, 1967), pp. 16-17.

[6]Quoted by Donald A. Stauffer in The Golden Nightingale (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 30.

[7]Earle Birney, The Creative Writer (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1966), p. 24.

[8]Stauffer, The Golden Nightingale, p. 17.

[9]Coleridge, "On Poesy or Art," English Romantic Writers, ed. Perkins, p. 495.

Chapter II

[1]Frank Davey, Earle Birney (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1971), p. 117.

[2]bp Nichol, "Introduction," Pnomes, Jukollages and Other Stunzas (Toronto: Ganglia Press, 1969); Bruce Nesbitt, "Introduction," Earle Birney, ed. Nesbitt (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974). The latter is essentially a review of Selected Poems.

[3]Roy Daniells, "Earle Birney et Robert Finch," Gants du Ciel, 11(1946), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 47-53. Daniells' article includes an excellent formal study of "David", but it is not concerned solely with Birney. Daniells compares Birney with Robert Finch, and uses both poets as examples in a general discussion of Canadian culture, Canadian poetry in relation to other modern poetry, and the establishment of critical standards for poetry in general. The article by W. E. Fredeman, "Earle Birney: Poet," B.C. Library Quarterly, 23(1960), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 107-114, tries valiantly to cover Birney's career to 1960 in eight pages. It is thus a mere overview, excellent as its conclusions are.

[4]A. J. M. Smith, "A Unified Personality: Birney's Poems," Canadian Literature, 30(1966), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 141-149. Bruce Nesbitt, "Introduction," Earle Birney, ed. Nesbitt, pp. 1-38.

[5]For instance, Nesbitt comments on p. 14: "Central to all of Birney's poetry is his definition of man's place in a world blind to the ironic consequences of the simultaneity of time."

[6]Milton Wilson, "Poet Without a Muse," Canadian Literature, 30(1966), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 150-156.

[7]Smith, "A Unified Personality"; Andy Wainwright, "Review of Rag & Bone Shop," Canadian Forum, 51(July-August 1971), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 173-175; Hayden Carruth, "Up, Over, and Out: The Poetry of Distraction," Tamarack Review, 42(1967), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 157-163; Paul West, "Earle Birney and the Compound Ghost," Canadian Literature, 13(1962), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 119-128.

[8]Albert Drake, "Review of Memory No Servant," Western Humanities Review, 23(1969), p. 180.

[9]A. Kingsley Weatherhead, "Review of Near False Creek Mouth," Northwest Review, 7, No. 1(1965), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 136-140.

[10]Milton Wilson, "Review of Near False Creek Mouth," University of Toronto Quarterly, 34(1965), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 134.

[11]The ad hoc approach can be further illustrated by the following excerpts from the reviews. Fred Cogswell in a review of Rag & Bone Shop entitled "Nearer the Bone," Canadian Literature, 49(1971), rpt. in Nesbitt, says on p. 176: "Having said this much about Birney's work in general...I should like to comment somewhat haphazardly about particular poems or groups of poems that to me appear, for good or bad, worthy of particular mention." Al Purdy, in a review of Near False Creek Mouth entitled "A Pair of 10-Foot Concrete Shoes," Fiddlehead, 65(1965), rpt. in Nesbitt, says on p. 133: "Well, some things in this new book are a delight. I don't like them all. To do so would seem to me a very bad judgment about any book. Besides, there's a good possibility I may like tomorrow what I don't like today. But keeping to the here and now, I especially like 'Cartagena de Indias'...." And Milton Wilson says in "Poet Without a Muse", p. 150: "What follows is at best a series of notes towards an unwritten revised portrait."

[12]George Woodcock, "Turning New Leaves," Canadian Forum, 46(1966), rpt. in Nesbitt, pp. 166-169; Paul West, "Earle Birney and the Compound Ghost"; and Hayden Carruth, "Up, Over, and Out".

[13]M. H. Martin, "Review of Now is Time," Canadian Forum, 25(1946), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 56.

[14]Roy Daniells, "Review of Strait of Anian," Canadian Poetry Magazine, 11(June 1948), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 59.

[15]Smith, "A Unified Personality," p. 141.

[16]Wilson, "Poet Without a Muse," p. 150.

[17]Carl Ballstadt, "Review of Rag & Bone Shop," Canadian Forum, 51(July-August 1971), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 173.

[18]Woodcock, "Turning New Leaves," p. 166.

[19]For instance, Roy Daniells, "Review of Strait of Anian," p. 59; L. A. MacKay, "Canadianism of Earle Birney is Both Subtle and Intense," Saturday Night, 63(24 July 1948), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 61; A. G. Bailey, "Review of Strait of Anian," Dalhousie Review, 30(1950), rpt. in Nesbitt, p. 67; George Woodcock, "Turning New Leaves," p. 166.

[20]For example, A. J. M. Smith's conclusion in "A Unified Personality," p. 149, is: "The real triumph of Selected Poems is that it demonstrates so clearly and forcibly...a unified personality of great charm, with, strength, and generosity." Wilson says in "Poet Without a Muse," p. 150, that: "The more Birney you read, the less he looks like anybody else. His asymmetrical, bulky, unpredictable accumulation of poems gathers individuality as it grows." But Wilson doesn't articulate what that individuality consists of. The review by Carruth, "Up, Over, and Out," also shows how a critic can be tricked into reacting to Birney's personality as evinced in the preface to Selected Poems rather than to the poems themselves.

[21]George Woodcock, "Introduction," A Choice of Critics: Selections from Canadian Literature (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. xii.

[22]Ibid., p. xii.

[23]Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

[24]Ibid., p. xiv.

[25]Ibid., p. xvi.

[26]Ibid., p. xiii. The phrase is A. J. M. Smith's.

[27]Ibid., p. xiii.

[28]West, "Earle Birney and the Compound Ghost," rpt. in Woodcock, p. 132.

[29]McClelland and Stewart limited Robillard to 64 pages including footnotes. Copp Clark allowed Davey exactly twice as many pages. Both books are in a small chap-book size, 4½" by 7¼".

[30]General Editor's Note in Richard Robillard, Earle Birney (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 4.

[31]What the critics have provided is more book reviews. After having been reviewed by Christopher Levenson, "Towards Universality," Canadian Literature, 66(Autumn 1975), pp. 99-101, Collected Poems has apparently been forgotten. Further, the critics have given us critiques of the critics. At one more remove from Birney's poetry, Clara Thomas in "Four Critical Problems," Canadian Literature, 56(Spring

1973), pp. 104-105, praises Robillard's study while making excuses for the Procrustean limitations of the handbook format, within which she herself has had to work. On the other hand, Mary Jane Edwards in "Anomalies," Canadian Literature, 56(Spring 1973), pp. 115-117, castigates Davey's study for not having enough close textual analysis and for its alleged misuse of the word "anomalies", while not admitting the limitations of the handbook form. My own conclusions about Davey and Robillard are the opposite of both, but to give my critiques of Thomas' and Edwards' critiques of Robillard's and Davey's critical studies of Birney would simply be a ludicrous extension of what Birney calls a tennis game without rules.

[32]Davey, Earle Birney, p. 52.

[33]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[34]Ibid., p. 64.

[35]For instance, Davey believes that "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" is sentimental and therefore bad poetry. His discussion of the poem displays a bias, in fact, against meditative poetry, for "November Walk" is hardly sentimental.

[36]Robillard, Earle Birney, p. 10.

[37]Ibid., p. 18.

[38]When Robillard discusses the Anglo-Saxon poems, his stylistic analysis is most inadequate. He doesn't mention the formulaic patterning of Anglo-Saxon poems, the elegiac mode, the combination of Christianity and paganism, the joys of the comitatus, the noun-adjective-verb-adverb hierarchy, or the use of alliteration for stress and even irony in several Anglo-Saxon poems. Instead, he gives this type of jargonized description: "If the first hemistich ends with a syntactical or grammatical period, the line is truly halved; but if the syntax runs on to the second hemistich, the caesura is only metrical and thus relatively brief....And the ground rules for these variations are all implicit in Old English poetry." (Ibid., p. 29) He does not seem to realize that in Anglo-Saxon poetry, discussion of anapaests, iambs, and caesuras is irrelevant. Metrical analysis is applicable only to later periods of poetry; in Anglo-Saxon poetry punctuation is guessed at by modern editors. Robillard never gives the groundrules or shows how Birney uses them for his own ironic purposes. Robillard has a further manifest error in his description of the Anglo-Saxons as "White, Anglo-Saxon, Pagan" (Ibid., p. 26). They were deeply Christian, as Beowulf, "The Seafarer", "The Wanderer", and especially "The Dream of the Rood" attest.

[39]Davey, Earle Birney, p. 117.

[40]It finds its counterpart in other modern criticism such as G. Karl Galinsky, The Herakles Theme (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972);

William B. Stanford, The Ulysses Theme (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954); Harry Slochower, Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970); and Roy Walker, The Golden Feast: A Perennial Theme in Poetry (London: Rockliff, 1952).

[41]K. K. Ruthven, Myth (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 66.

[42]Frank Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase," Canadian Literature, 70(Autumn 1976), p. 5.

[43]D. G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 22-23.

[44]W. H. New, Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. 259.

[45]Ibid., pp. 261-262.

[46]Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase," p. 6.

[47]Ibid., p. 12.

Chapter III

[1]Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase," p. 5.

[2]Stauffer, The Golden Nightingale, p. 23.

[3]Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), Ch. XIV, p. 161.

[4]Stauffer introduces Vaihinger on p. 6 of The Golden Nightingale.

[5]Stauffer, The Golden Nightingale, p. 6. Stauffer explains that: "Vaihinger distinguishes a fiction from a hypothesis....[He] thinks of a hypothesis as something which presumably will be proved true. A fiction...is simply a construct to help us get along with our thinking. Fictions may contradict reality or even themselves; they may disappear like scaffolding when their purpose is served; they may be realized consciously as untrue. Yet they are expedient; they work."

[6]Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Ch. XII, pp. 134-135.

[7]William Butler Yeats, "Prayer for Old Age," Selected Poetry, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 175-176.

[8]David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965); Rosemond Tuve, Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957); Wolfgang Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery (1951; rpt. London: Methuen, 1967); Barbara Hardy, "Imagery in George Eliot's Last Novels," Modern Language Review, 50(1955), 6-14.

[9]Birney, The Creative Writer, p. 15.

[10]Stauffer, p. 52.

[11]For instance, see Birney's chapter entitled "Madness and the Exorcism of Poetry," in The Creative Writer, pp. 12-23.

[12]Stauffer, p. 53.

[13]Coleridge, "On the Principles of Genial Criticism," p. 442.

[14]Stauffer, p. 53.

[15]Earle Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon: The Reading and Writing of Poetry (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1972), p. 7.

[16]Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[17]Yeats, "Discoveries," Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 297.

[18]Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, p. 8.

Chapter IV

[1]Mao Tse-Tung, "Snowscape from a Plane," trans. Earle Birney, Collected Poems (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), II, 31.

[2]For all quotations from Birney's poems, I am using the text presented in Collected Poems, abbreviated CP. All future references to this edition will be included in the text of my thesis. I have pointed out the odd significant variation from earlier versions of the poems.

[3]The pastoral elegy tradition is discussed at length in Scott Elledge, ed., Milton's 'Lycidas' (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). He gives translations and reprints of Theocritus , Bion, Moschus, Virgil, Petrarch, Milton, and others. In particular, see Virgil's "Pastoral V", p. 30, in which Menalcas and Mopsus take turns singing.

[4]I suggest that Birney's realism in "David" makes the poem an ironic pastoral.

[5]Adeline Bartlett, The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry (Morningside Heights, New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), p. 11. The envelope pattern is common in Anglo-Saxon poetry; here is Bartlett's definition: "The name Envelope is here applied to any logically unified group of verses bound together by the repetition at the end of (1) words or (2) ideas or (3) words and ideas which are employed at the beginning." Birney also uses the envelope pattern in such poems as "Atlantic Door", "Pacific Door", and "Prosperity in Poza Rica". In all three of these poems the

rhetorical structure of the envelope pattern serves the purpose of creating irony.

[6]"The Wanderer," An Old English Anthology, ed. W. F. Bolton (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1963), p. 81.

Eorlas fornoman asca þryþe
...ond þas stanhleoþu stormas cnyssa
hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð
wintres woma þonne won cymeð
nipeð nihtscua, norðan onsendeð
hreo hæglfare hæleþum on andan:
eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice (ll. 99-106)

[Noblemen are carried away by the strength of ash-spears
...and on the stony-slopes storms beat
the storm falling binds the earth
with winter's terror, then darkness comes
the night-shadow darkens, sent from the north
a fierce hailstorm, in terror to warriors:
all is troubled in the kingdom of the earth] (translation mine)

[7]"The Wanderer", p. 78:

Nis nu cwicra nan
þe ic him modsefan minne durre
sweotule asecgan. Ic to soþe wat
þæt biþ in eorle indrihten þeaw,
þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,
healde his hordcofan (ll. 9-14)

[There is now no one alive
to whom I can openly tell the secret
thoughts of my mind. I know very truly
that it is in a nobleman a lordly custom
to bind fast his mind-heart-lock
hold his hidden heart] (translation mine)

[8]This is much like the idea of the Anglo-Saxon Wyrde 'fate'.

[9]In Norse mythology, the Valkyries are the maidens of Odin who conduct to Valhalla the souls of heroes slain in battle. Thus Birney's use of the Word "valkyrie" foreshadows in a subtle way the mountaineer's death.

[10]The poem "Oldster" (CP I, 50) also presents tree bark as flesh:

He has grown old as poplars do
dappling somehow--the green sheen spent--
his olive hide with a pithy comment of scars

[11]Jerome Taylor, "Critics, Mutations and Historians of Medieval English Drama," Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 16. Taylor makes an apt distinction between

simplicity and complexity: "Complexity does not 'evolve' from simplicity; each involves a distinct style in the handling of materials and form. The simple, properly conceived, is the contrary of the simple-minded; the simple is not raw, crude, artless, signifying little, primitive like a childish beginning, but pure in materials and form, spare in their refinement, restrained like classic art, profound in direct appeal....Complexity is often elaborate, overlaid with multiple artistic designs, laced with intricate meanings, and oblique in the edgy scrutiny which its sophistication, like that of some 'mature' adults, invites."

[12]It is like Chaucer's "double sorwe" of Troilus: "Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie", l. 4, "Troilus and Criseyde," The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

Chapter V

[1]Joseph Wood Krutch, Baja California and the Geography of Hope, with photographs by Eliot Porter, ed. Kenneth Brower (New York: Sierra Club and Ballantine Books, 1969), p. 60.

[2]For example, in the Anglo-Saxon fragment "The Ruin," A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 26-29, the poet describes the ruined city, all that remains of a glory that has vanished:

Wræ tlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræ con;
burgstede burston, brosnað enta geweorc.
Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras,
hrungeat berofen, hrim on lime,
scearde scurbeorge scorene gedrorene,
æ ldo undereotone. Eorðgrap hafað
waldendwyrhtan forweorone geleorene,
heard gripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea
werþeoda gewitan.

[Splendid this rampart is, though fate destroyed it;
The city building fell apart, the works
Of giants crumble. Tumbled are the towers,
Ruined the roofs, and broken the barred gate,
Frost in the plaster, all the ceilings gape,
Torn and collapsed and eaten up by age.
And grit holds in its grip, the hard embrace
Of earth, the dead departed master-builders,
Until a hundred generations now
Of people have passed by.] (trans. Richard Hamer)

Birney is not as quick as the Anglo-Saxon poet to attribute the crumbling of the architrave to the action of wyrde 'fate', but there is the same sense of finality in his words "sooner or later you will finish dying/ like all of us".

[3]Again from "The Ruin":

hwæ tred in hringas hygerof gebond
weallwalan wirum wundrum togæ dre.

[Resolute masons, skilled in rounded building
Wondrously linked the foundation with iron bonds.] (trans. Hamer)

[4]Here is The Wanderer's "ubi sunt" lament:

Se þonne þisne wealsteal wise geþohte
ond þis deorce lif deope geondþenceð
frod in ferðe, feor oft gemon
wæ lsleahta worn ond þas word acwið:
'Hwæ r cwom mearg? Hwæ r cwom mago? Hwa er cwom maþþumgyfa?
Hwæ r cwom symbla gesetu? Hwæ r sindon seledreamas?
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!
Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat,
genap under nihthelm swa heo no wæ re.' (ll. 88-96)

[He then wisely thinks about this wall-foundation
and this dark life, he deeply considers
wise in spirit, life often remembers
of battle-troops, and this word speaks:
'Where is gone the mare? Where is gone the kinsman? Where
is gone the treasure-giver?
Where are gone the feast-dwellings? Where are the hall-joys?
Alas bright cup! Alas byrnied warrior!
Alas the prince's glory! How the time has departed,
darkened under the helmet of night, as if it never were.']
(translation mine)

[5]As in "Conrad Kain" and "David", the climbers laugh and prattle to cover up their nervousness in the face of the awe and silence of the mountain peak.

[6]The meditative poem "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth" (CP II, 43) also expresses this image of the mountain crumbling and dissolving into the sea:

The act is the sliding out
to the shifting rotting
folds of the sands that lip
slipping to reefs and sinking cliffs
that ladder down to the ocean's abyss
...
The beat beating is the soft cheek
nudging of the sly shoving almost
immortal ocean at work
on the earth's liquidation

[7]Bruce Nesbitt's unamplified comment can be clarified by this example from one of Birney's poems. As Nesbitt says on p. 14 of his "Introduction": "Central to all of Birney's poetry is his definition of man's place in a world blind to the ironic consequences of the simultaneity of time." Similarly, one of Richard Robillard's

clever phrases, on p. 8 of Earle Birney, is particularly apt here: "the intersection of eternity and the dazzling instant".

[8]The poet's biography and speaker's biography coincide at this point, for Birney was born in a log cabin and spent his early years west of Calgary.

[9]John Milton, "Lycidas," Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), p. 116.

[10]Stauffer, pp. 98-99: "The profound spirit of this positive act of creation lies in tragedy itself....The source of art may well be some actual limitation, some imperfection, some aching void, some agony that demands in answer the poet's created affirmation of the ideal or the possible....Man's unsatisfied soul demands satisfaction, and satisfaction is given in the joy of art."

[11]Birney, "The Writing of a Poem: Compulsion and Suppression," The Creative Writer, pp. 29-33.

[12]MacLeish, Poetry and Experience, p. 66.

Chapter VI

[1]Birney, The Creative Writer, p. 20.

[2]See "Time Bomb" (CP I, 89):

O men be swift to be mankind
Or let the grizzly take.

[3]Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, p. 17.

Chapter VII

[1]Mao Tse-Tung, "Midstream," (CP II, 29), trans. Birney.

[2]Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, p. 1: "What this book is concerned with is writing made out of a need to record, and a hope of sharing."

[3]Read, Poetry and Experience, p. 34.

[4]Jacques Maritain, Art and Scholasticism (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), p. 57.

[5]Perkins, The Quest for Permanence, p. 7.

[6]Stauffer, pp. 28-29.

[7]Yeats, "William Blake and His Illustrations to The Divine Comedy," Essays and Introductions, p. 140.

[8]Birney, Selected Poems, 1940-1966 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 122.

[9]Stauffer, p. 31.

[10]Birney, The Creative Writer, p. 14; p. 69.

[11]Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, p. 73.

[12]Henry H. H. Remak, "Vinegar and Water: Allegory and Symbolism in the German Novelle between Keller and Bergengruen," Literary Symbolism: A Symposium, ed. Helmut Rehder (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1965), p. 37.

[13]Ibid., p. 37.

[14]Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, p. 72: "The meaning of 'David' is what I put into it plus anything else you get out of it. The meaning...varies according to the reader's basic language abilities and sensitivities, his acquaintance with other literature and with the background of the poem." In other parts of the same book, Birney expresses his delight with other people's interpretations of "David" which are valid even though he hadn't originally thought of them. This also reinforces the idea of the rightness of the instinctive mode of writing, and the endless meanings of a symbol.

[15]Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," p. 87.

[16]Jeremy Bernstein, "Ascending: A Profile of Yvon Chouinard," New Yorker, 31 January 1977, p. 46. Bernstein quotes the American climber Chouinard as saying: "...climbing tends to be different from a lot of other sports. It attracts the introverts--the real oddballs.... In climbing, at the end of the rope there, you're pretty much by yourself, and that burns a lot of people out."

[17]Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), pp. 181-182.

[18]Marshall McLuhan with Wilfred Watson, From Cliché to Archetype (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 21. I am reminded here of McLuhan and Watson's assertion that clichés and archetypes spring from the same well: "The archetype...is an old cliché retrieved by a new cliché."

[19]See Birney's comments about "David" on p. 8 of The Cow Jumped Over The Moon, where he says he didn't want to make any facile remarks like "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may".

[20]Birney, The Cow Jumped Over the Moon, P. 2.

[21]Yeats, "William Blake and the Imagination," p. 112.

[22]Stauffer, p. 33.

[23]Ibid., p. 34.

[24]Ibid., p. 35.

[25]Krutch, Baja California and the Geography of Hope, p. 22.

[26]Stauffer, p. 36.

[27]Ibid., p. 37.

[28]Birney, The Creative Writer, p. 17.

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